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by WALT COBURN

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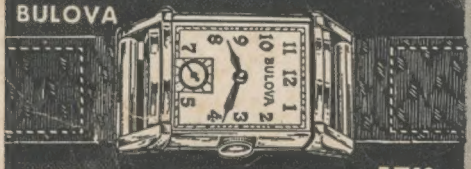

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WESTERN MAGAZINE

AUGUST ISSUE PUBLISHED JULY 3!

VOLUME XLIX JULY, 1947 NUMBER 3

Two Dramatic Western Novels

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Old Tom Lackner told the only pard he had in the world, "They tried to buy me, and I laughed at 'em! They tried to run me out, and I spit in their faces! Now they're on the kill—and they aim to hang up your hide to dry alongside mine!"

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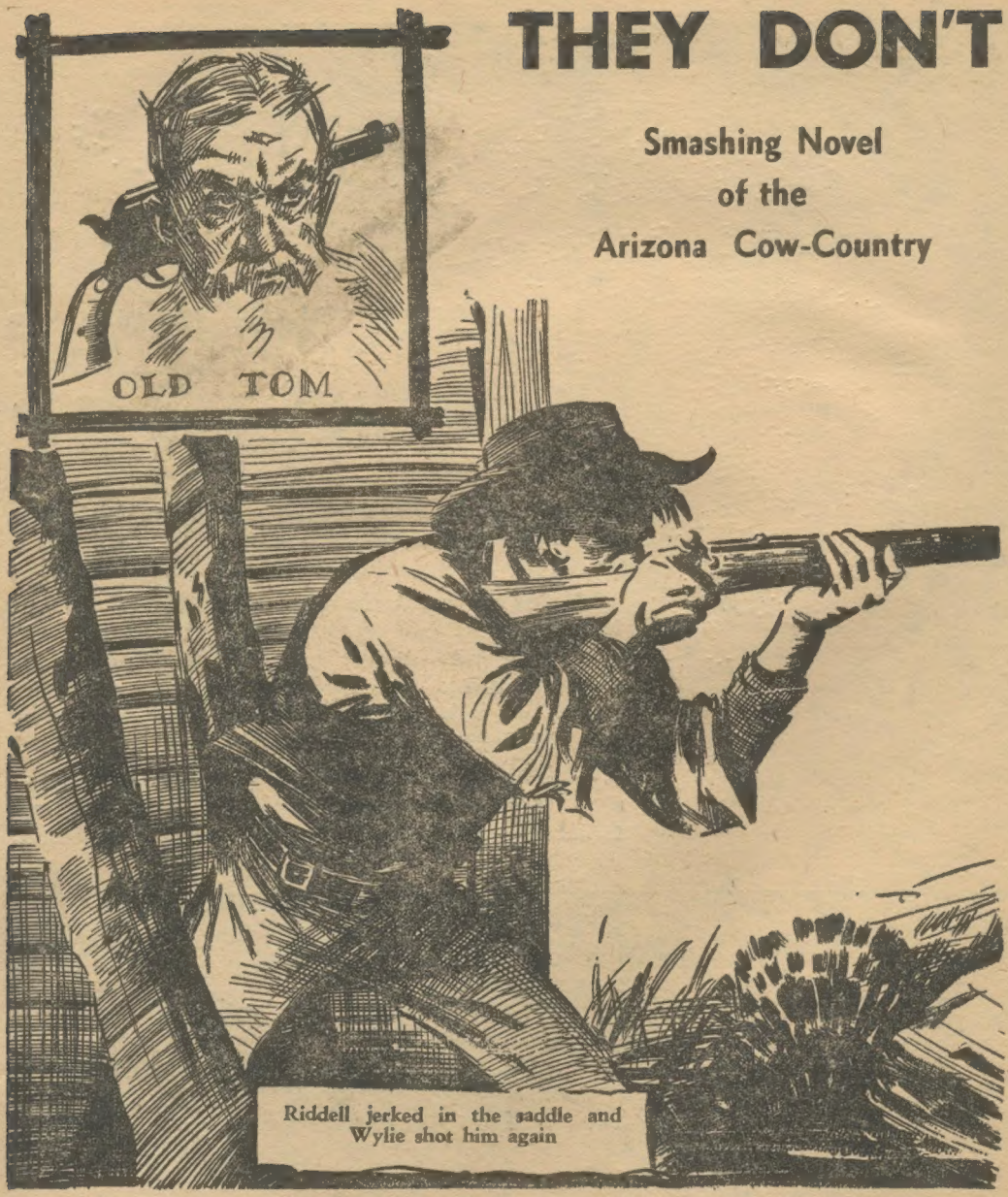
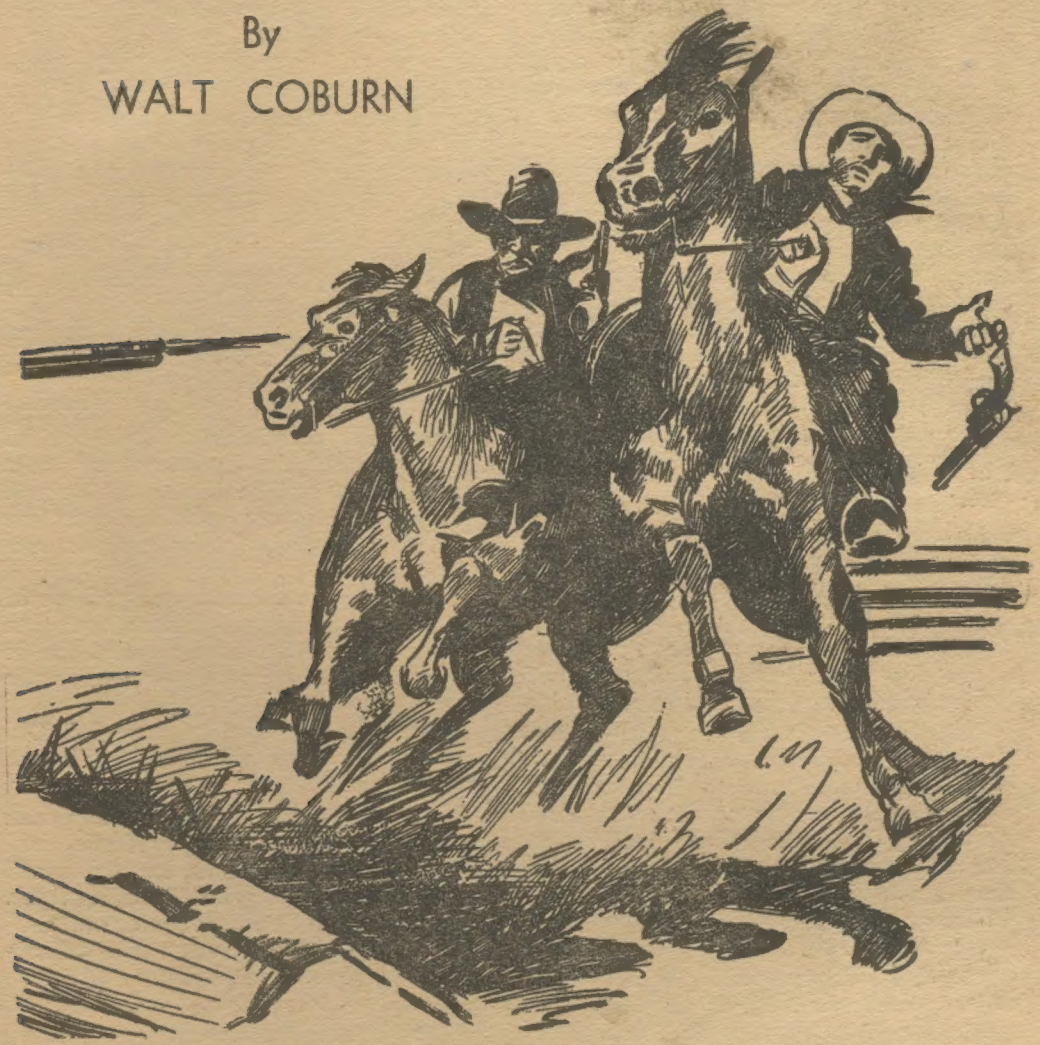


Riddell jerked in the saddle and Wylie shot him again

"They bin a-tryin', Jay," Old Tom Lackner told his hired hand, "to rob me outa my outfit since I kin recollect. They tried to buy me out at their own price, and I give 'em the horse laugh. They tried to run me out and I stood my ground and spit in their damn faces. They tried stealin' from me, an' I stole from them till the sons come beggin' for mercy. They'd kill me off right now if they had the guts to tackle me. And now they're after you, son. They aim to hang your hide on the fence with mine. . . ."

COME TOUGHER! • •

By
WALT COBURN



CHAPTER ONE

Mossyhorn Hellion of the T L

WHEN wild Jay Wylie hired out to tough Tom Lackner the Arizona cow country called it a natural; ordinarilly no outfit would give Wylie a job; ordinarilly there wasn't a hand would work for Lackner.

Not that there was anything actually bad about Wylie. Jay was a top brush-popper cowhand, had plenty savvy and was plumb fearless when it came to matching a race with a wild outlaw steer down the steep slants of the Whetrocks. The main trouble with Jay Wylie was he had a hungy loop built all the time and roped everything; it was hard on the cattle. When Wylie was needed to help hold up a bunch of cattle on the round-up, he was most apt to be matching himself a race down the mountain with

some two-bit old renegade steer, for the glory of catching another wild 'un in the roughs. Jay Wylie had his cowpuncher heart set on being world champion roper and was forever practicing on some outfit's livestock. Otherwise they hadn't anything against this tow-headed, short-statured, husky cowhand. He had a wide grin, a pair of laughing blue eyes and could get along with anybody on earth.

Big and raw-boned, Tom Lackner was about seventy. He was white-haired and white-whiskered; one lean jaw usually bulged with a quid of natural leaf. His gray eyes peered out from bushy gray brows. Hawk-beaked and lean, he bragged about having all his own teeth. He had a remuda of the fastest Steeldust cow horses a man could hope to own. And even at his age, with his gnarled, knotted, brittle old bones, he rode as wild and reckless as any young wild brush-popper. He ran his cattle in the toughest, brushiest part of the Whetrock Mountains.

When Tom Lackner registered his TL connected he said he realized it was a brand almighty easy to work into any of the irons that belonged to the greasy sack outfits around him.

"But it'll give me an excuse to gut-shoot ary one of them hungry-loop cowmen I ketch chankin' my TL into their iron."

Lackner meant it and the greasy-sackers knew it. They hated him all the more—because they were scared of Tom Lackner.

And where two-bit cowmen like Zeke Carothers, Clyde Riddell and Joe Fernald and their cowpunchers were damned cautious about slipping over onto Lackner's TL range, old Tom would ride anywhere to gather his TL stuff.

"I got a horn drooped," Lackner would tell any man who tried to stop him. "I'm li'ble to hook deep ary gentle Annie gits in my way."

Lackner ran his own whiskey still. His corn likker was never aged and far too potent for the average man's taste. He claimed he made his own whiskey because the stuff they peddled in town didn't have any authority. Bellywash, he called the town booze.

Lackner lived on jerky, pinto beans, dutch oven bread and coffee strong and black; he kept a thick layer of old grounds in the blackened coffee pot, to flavor it, he said. He drank the stuff without sugar or canned milk.

Any cowpuncher working for the TL had to furnish his own sugar if he must have sugar. If a man couldn't live on jerky, beans and bread then he had no business hiring out to the TL.

A man had to be one hundred percent wild brush-popper to hold down a job at the TL because here were rough country and wild cattle. When you jumped a maverick you roped and branded him regardless of steep slants, thick brush and big boulders.

A string of TL Steeldusts was something to set. Each horse that wore the TL would buck when you stepped up on him. If a man could stay in the middle those first few jumps he had a cow horse under him the rest of the ride.

If a cowpuncher fought or in any way abused a TL horse Lackner would set him afoot then and there. Lackner would make him walk to town if he didn't own a private horse and like as not work him over first with his big tough fists, a club or six-shooter barrel.

Tom Lackner paid mean wages. He said he'd double that thirty-a-month after a man had worked for him three months, double that again after six months—so on up the scale.

"Work fer the TL long enough," Old Tom Lackner would grin, "and you'll own the damn' outfit."

Two months was the longest any man had ever stuck it out until Jay Wylie hired out to Lackner. Somehow, they hit it off. Jay Wylie said the grub suited him. He could rope to his heart's content, from daybreak till dark. And, like as not, old Lackner was right along with him.

UNCOCKING his string of horses didn't bother Jay Wylie a bit. If a horse had to pitch, Jay let him pitch. If he got thrown he got back on again and, in the end, rode him. It wasn't in Wylie's nature to fight a horse; he was a natural born horse-lover.

"But I can't drink that likker of yourn, Tom," Wylie said, "A man needs steel linin' in his belly."

"I don't encourage a man," the old cowman grinned. "Keeps that still of mine a-runnin' night an' day to drip out enough fer my personal use."

Wylie worked for a year on the TL. The only time he left the range was when he entered roping contests at Prescott, Payson or Tucson. Lackner went along with a roll of money to bet on Wylie. And Wylie won more often than he lost.

Lackner would back Wylie to the limit. He offered to bet his TL outfit, lock, stock and barrel, against the greasy sack outfits of Zeke Carothers or Joe Fernald or Clyde Riddell.

"You fellers bin tryin' to git my outfit away from me since I kin remember," Lackner snarled at them. "Now's your chance to git it fer nothin'. I'll match Wylie ag'in' ary brush-popper you got in your outfits. Put up or shut up!"

None would take Lackner's bet but they still wanted his TL. It was by far the best cattle range in the Whetrocks. Even during long droughts there was still enough water and feed on TL to keep cattle alive.

"They bin a-tryin', Jay," the mossy-horn bawled, "to rob me outa my outfit since I kin reckollect. They tried to buy me out at their own price and I give 'em the horse laugh. They tried to run me out an' I stood my ground an' spit in their damn faces. They tried stealin' from me an' I stole from them till they got a sick bellyful of that an' the sons come beggin' fer mercy. They'd kill me off right now if they had the guts to tackle me." Ornery Tom Lackner spat tobacco juice and tilted his jug.

"Them sons'll never quit tryin' to git Old Man Tom Lackner," he prophesied. "And now that you held down a job with me a year and more, they're after you, son. They aim to hang your hide on the fence with mine. Don't never let 'em ketch you lookin' the other way."

"I'll watch 'em, Tom," Jay Wylie said. "I'll try not to git ketched off guard."

Those first few months had been plain hell. Lackner had dealt Wylie all the dirt a cowman could dish out to his one hired cowhand. Wylie had to grit his teeth and grin and bear it. It took all the guts and tolerance he had.

Then the old cowman began gradually easing up. In spite of himself. Instead of his continual drunken snarling and cussing abuse, he got so he would sit around and auger with Jay by the hour. Mostly his talk was about his greasy sack outfit neighbors and the countless times he had outwolfed them. Jay would squat on his hunkers and listen. After a while he began to see through that tough shell and he got to actually liking the old hellion. And Lackner, at the end of that year, was as fond of Wylie as he would be of his own son. He was proud as hell about the kid's roping and how he had toughed it out those few first months.

"I got no kin on this earth, son," Lackner said one night. "Nary a one. Nobody to hand this outfit down to when I die. You hang an' rattle, son. Keep on the way you bin a-doin' and this spread will be yourn some day."

"That ain't what I had in mind, Tom," Wylie said quietly, "when I hired out."

"Then what the hell," Lackner snarled in a lame effort to cover up that moment of weakness, "did you have in mind, you young whelp?"

"Damned if I know," Jay grinned.

That tickled old Lackner and he chuckled and spat tobacco juice and took a pull at his jug of corn likker.

Wylie was covering up something inside his heart he did not quite understand. It was something that put an aching lump in his throat. Old Tom had lain his cards on the table so Jay spread his own face up.

"I don't know where I was born or raised the first half dozen years of my life," he said. "I have no memory of a father or mother. I don't know how nor where I got the name of Jay Wylie. I bin ridin' a horse since I kin recall. Driftin'. I've stayed here at the TL longer than I ever stayed anywheres—and damned if I know why! What you said about handin' down this outfit to me, it makes me feel kinda warm inside! If that's how it happens, Tom, you kin rest easy in your grave. I'll ramrod this TL the same as if you was still here. I'll pension off the old ponies—but, hell, Tom, you're too tough to die. You'll live forever."

That was all they ever said about it. They shied away from it because they both had a notion they sounded soft and sentimental. And they prided themselves on their toughness. It was typical of Tom Lackner that it never occurred to him to put it down in writing. Nor did Jay Wylie want any pen and ink document to prove it. A cowman's word was as good as a banker's bond. That

was the way it was and that was the way it stayed.

Neither Lackner nor Wylie suspicioned that the greasy sack outfit had figured it out that same way; that Zeke Carothers, Joe Fernald and Clyde Riddell had their three heads together making war medicine with that in mind.

Up until Jay Wylie had moved in at the TL, they had almost decided to sit back and whittle till the rotgut booze or a bad fall in the roughs would kill off Lackner.

"Now we can't afford to wait no longer." That was their decision.

They set their trap and, when the sign was right, they sprung it. That snare caught both old Lackner and young Wylie. It was a law trap—and it worked.

The main reason it worked was because, up until now, none of them had ever thought of calling on the law to settle anything. They had always fought it out among themselves. They lived by their wits and guts. They waged their range war with their ketch-ropes, running irons and guns.

So when Carothers, Fernald and Riddell did call in the law, it caught Lackner and Wylie off guard. They were under arrest before they knew what had happened.

CHAPTER TWO

Until Hell Freezes Over

OLD Tom Lackner claimed that a cowman who ate his own beef was a rank coward. Carothers, Riddell and Fernald were eating his TL beef but they did it on the sly. So, when TL began running low on jerky, Lackner told Jay to corral a fat 'un.

"One of ourn, son." Lackner grinned crookedly and spat.

When Zeke Carothers, Clyde Riddell and Joe Fernald first moved into the Whetrocks and surrounded Lackner on three sides, each had registered his own brand, one that could be altered into Lackner's TL connected. Carothers was a Cross 4 connected. Riddell registered the Four Pane Window, or Window Sash brand. Fernald's was a Lazy H.

For the first few years it was a contest among the three long rope cowmen to see who could steal the most cattle from Lackner by altering his TL into their irons. It was when they got to stealing from one another that they decided to pool their three little outfits, use one brand and split the calf crop and beef steers three ways. That way they would share alike and quit altering their own brands. They settled on the Lazy H because it was the easiest and quickest to alter from the TL. And with tough old Tom Lackner on the prowl with a Winchester there were times when a man had to be damn quick with his running iron to get a brand burnt on a critter's hide and turned loose in time to out-run one of old Tom's .30-30 bullets.

"One of ourn, son." Lackner told Jay Wylie.

Jay cut out a fat yearling, corralled it and he and Tom read the Lazy H on its hide. The thing was big as a sign board. When the sun went down they butchered in the cool of the evening. They quartered the beef and hung the quarters from the cross-pole of the high corral gate. They hung the hide on the fence without bothering to cut out the Lazy H brand. Leaving the brand on the hide was a matter of ornery pride with Lackner.

"Let 'em ride up an' read it, by the hell, if they've a mind to."

Lackner never dodged any kind of a showdown with his enemies. Futhermore, he told Wylie, if a man wanted to take the trouble to scrape the under-side of the hide he could show where his TL brand had been worked into their Lazy H. It was the bottom side that showed traces of brand-altering and told the tale.

The quarters were hanging from the corral gate cross-pole and the hide hung on the fence when Carothers, Riddell and Fernald rode up at the TL home ranch the next morning at sunrise. But they were not alone. They had fetched along a deputy sheriff and a livestock inspector.

Lackner had heard them coming; he met them with a saddle carbine. At his back, there in the cabin doorway, was Jay Wylie with his saddle gun.

Tom Lackner saw the metallic shine of the two law badges and lowered his gun. Wylie had never before seen that expression on Tom Lackner's white-whiskered face.

"The cowardly sons!" Old Tom's voice was a croaking whisper. "The dirty damned cowardly coyote sons!"

Carothers, Riddell and Fernald hung back. Even with the law there to hide behind, they remained out of saddle gun range. The deputy and the inspector, saddle guns ready, rode to where Lackner and Wylie stood side by side. They were set to swing down quickly and fire if they got crowded.

"Take 'er easy, Tom!" the deputy called.

"Nobody but you," Tom Lackner snarled, "is gettin' excited."

"We want a look at that fresh beef hide," the inspector said.

"You won't need specs to read the brand on it."

"One of yourn, Tom?" The inspector sounded relieved.

"One of ourn, mister," Lackner said. "If you take a fleshin' hook an' scrape the underneath side you'll find out. Providin' a cattle inspector has enough savvy to recognize a worked brand when he sees one."

The two officers rode up to the fence. The hair side of the hide showed; there was the big Lazy H and it wasn't fresh. It was haired over and it was a Lazy H. The inspector told Lackner they hadn't the time nor the inclination to bother around scraping hides.

"I got bench warrants," he said, "for both of you."

"Throw away them guns," added the deputy sheriff. "No need of havin' gun trouble, Tom."

Lackner spat tobacco juice on the ground.

"They're the law, Tom," Wylie said. "A man can't win."

Wylie laid down his saddle gun and unbuckled his filled cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter. He walked toward where the officers sat their horses, his hands raised.

"I'm your huckleberry," Wylie grinned. "I killed that beef. I butchered it. And I hung that hide on the fence. You kin tear up that warrant with Lackner's name on it. He didn't have no part of it."

"What do you mean, Wylie?" the deputy asked. He was a big man named Frank Estes, a cowpuncher by trade.

"Just what I said. I aimed to load them quarters on pack mules and take the meat to town, peddle it and make myself a few dollars on the side."

Carothers, Riddell and Fernald rode up now, guns in their hands.

CAROTHERS was a tall, slim man in his thirties. His taste ran to fancy shirts, tight-fitting pants, 5X beaver Stetson hats and boots with extra fancy tops. He kept his black hair slicked down and his thin black mustache twisted and waxed. His yellow eyes were set under black brows. He stank of honkytonk perfume. But he was one of the fastest brush-poppers in the country. Riddell was forty. His reddish hair was graying; he had pale eyes. His denim jacket and bullhide chaps were old and brush-scarred. He was big, powerful and sat a horse heavily. He usually won the bull-dogging at the local rodeos.

Grizzled Fernald was in his early sixties, and tough as a boot. A small, wiry, dangerous man afoot or a-horseback. He ramrodded the Lazy H.

Joe Fernald rode up ahead of his pardners in time to overhear what Wylie said.

"Wylie," Fernald's voice had a creaky sound, "is nothin' more than a hired man around here. You goin' to let him peddle you a damned lie like that? I got bench warrants swore out fer Lackner an' Wylie. It's your job as deputy sheriff to serve both them warrants, regardless. Have at it. If you need gun help, you got it. We deputized ourselves. What the hell's holdin' you back?"

"Looks like I got to take you both to town." Estes' face had reddened. "That's the law. I hope you don't give us no kind of trouble, Tom."

Lackner had been looking at Wylie, a strange look in his eyes. He hadn't expected the kid to step out like that and take the blame. It was the first time any man had ever actually befriended him. Wylie had done more than that; he was fronting for him, trying to save Lackner's tough old hide. It warmed old Tom inside like a big shot of his moonshine corn likker.

Lackner turned on Fernald. But instead of cussing the man out, he just looked at him. When he broke the silence his voice had none of its customary toughness.

"I shore feel almighty sorry for a man," said Lackner, "when he loses his guts."

Fernald's hatchet face whitened. He sat humped over his saddle horn. His eyes cut a quick ugly look at Carothers and Riddell. Under his drooping gray mustache his mouth twisted as though he was going to say something. Then he changed his

mind. But he kept staring at Lackner.

Tom Lackner shouted suddenly to the inspector, "Take that hide yonder. Hang onto it. Me'n Wylie is under arrest and we'll go along to jail. But this is my ranch. This is my land them three gutless cowards yonder is on. You got your bench warrants served. Now run them three trespassers off my land before they start stealin' whatever they kin pack, drag or drive off. You're the law, you two misters. Haze them three Lazy H cowards off my land."

Lackner still had his saddle gun gripped in his gnarled hands.

"Drag it!" Deputy Sheriff Frank Estes turned on Carothers, Riddell and Fernald. "Lackner's got his rights. Git off his land!"

The inspector was Perry Smith. Until they had somehow gotten that law badge pinned on him, he had worked for the Lazy H and had done his share of brand-altering. He was a lean man with shifting eyes. Those eyes kept looking at Fernald like he was expecting further orders from the ramrod.

"You hang onto that hide, Perry!" Fernald bit off his words and spat them viciously. "Don't let anybody switch hides on you. That 'un is goin' to send Lackner to Yuma, where he damn well belongs."

Fernald reined his horse and jerked his head. The three rode off.

"You kin pack that hide," Estes told Smith. "This is your picnic."

Estes told Wylie to pick up his guns and keep 'em till they got to jail.

"I don't like this," he told Wylie and Lackner, "no more than you do."

Smith rolled the green hide with its Lazy H brand, slung it across the back of his saddle and tied it on by the saddle strings. It was sodden and bulky, but he knew better than to ask for a pack mule to carry the hide to town.

The big deputy gave Lackner and Wylie time to do their chores. They closed the cabin, saddled fresh horses and got ready to pull out. Lackner filled a jug and hung it by a whang-leather loop from his saddle horn and said he was ready to go.

"What'll we do about them quarters of beef hangin' there?" Smith asked.

"Why don't you just eat it?" Wylie grinned. "You act like you need some raw meat, Perry."

"Let 'er hang an' rot," Lackner snarled.

"It's your picnic," the deputy sheriff said. "You got the hide. There's the meat it belongs to—Exhibit A! It's your picnic. An' it's strictly your bellyache. All right, Tom. You an' Wylie, let's travel along into town."

They rode along together and Smith followed with the beef hide. After a mile the big deputy let Lackner and Wylie ride a little ahead; he dropped back out of earshot to let them talk it over.

"Whatever in the name of hell, son," Lackner asked, "got into you, declarin' yourself thataway? Makin' up that damn lie about peddlin' meat?"

"It's a free country, Tom. A man's got a right to his free speech." Wylie grinned faintly.

"You aim to stick to what you just told 'em."

"Till hell freezes over, Tom. Until hell freezes over."

"Why?"

"That penitentiary at Yuma is a tough place. It's a stinkin' hell-hole of a prison. Out here on the open range, Tom, you're tough as a boot. And you'll live to be older than them Whetrocks. Six months in Yuma and them guards would have you packed outa your stinkin' hot cell feet first. When your times comes to die, Tom, you done earned the right to cash in out in the open under that sky yonder."

"What about you, son? If the judge throws the book at yuh?"

"I'll manage."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Dammit, young feller! Why? You got no right to go to the pen fer me! You're no more than a hired man a-horseback! I'm askin' you now fer the last damned time. Why?"

"Damned if I know, Tom."

Tom grunted, snarled, unslung his jug and tilted it.

Lackner let it go at that and they rode on to town with Deputy Sheriff Frank Estes. They put up their horses at the feed barn, then went on to jail where they surrendered their guns. They shared a cell and Frank Estes fetched them the best supper money could buy at the restaurant. He fetched, too, the best lawyer in town. But he refused to drink from old Tom Lackner's jug. So did the lawyer.

CHAPTER THREE

"Five to Fifteen Years . . . ."

THE trial was short. The lawyer knew his business. Jay Wylie stuck to the story he had told and pleaded guilty. Nothing could change Wylie's story.

Tom Lackner had the hide scraped on the under side. But if it was an altered brand it was a first class job and didn't show on the under side. That shot Wylie's last hope to hell and gone. He sat there in clean Levi overalls and a new blue flannel shirt and shopmade boots. He was handcuffed.

The courtroom was packed. Every man there knew Wylie was perjuring himself. And they could not puzzle out why any man would take the blame for tough ornery old Tom. They figured Lackner had bribed Wylie. Paid him big money to take the rap that meant a stretch in the hell-hole Arizona Territorial prison where even a tough white man would die of prison plague inside of five years.

They admired Wylie's guts. And no man blamed him for perjuring himself there on the witness stand. They hated tough old Tom Lackner all the more for letting that cowpuncher take the blame.

But if they hated old Lackner, they hated Joe Fernald, Zeke Carothers and Clyde Riddell more. Because the Lazy H had called in the Law.

None of the Lazy H outfit could face it. Carothers and Riddell stuck close together. They packed guns and together bluffed it through with hard-eyed defiance. They were ready to fight if any man said anything out of line.

Fernald toughed it out alone. When the charge against Lackner was thrown out of court, Fernald seemed relieved.

There was only one woman in the crowd. Fernald's only daughter, Donna Fernald, sat beside her father.

Donna was small. Her black hair had coppery highlights. Her skin was tanned and freckled. Her eyes, soft and black as velvet, were set under almost heavy black brows. She wasn't beautiful. Her nose was too short and her mouth too wide. But there was something about her freckled face, black eyes and slim figure that caught and held a man's eye.

Donna wasn't a ranch girl. She knew how to ride a horse but that was all. When her mother died, she kept house for her father for a while. Then she left the ranch and moved to town and finished her education and got a job teaching school at the little cow town of Whetrock. It wasn't much of a school. But it was a job that gave Donna her independence. She was headstrong and had a lot of pride and she was self-sufficient. The school kids liked her. Even when she lost her temper and punished them, they admired her courage. And they came to her with their troubles and quarrels. Donna mothered them and settled their difficulties. And if it was a quarrel between two boys and they were evenly matched she brought out a set of big punching bag boxing gloves and had them fight it out and she refereed the fight and made them shake hands when the fight was won and lost. Or if it was a bigger boy who picked on a smaller boy she had a rawhide whip and she used it.

Donna was twenty-one. And every cowpuncher in the country had at one time or another wanted to marry her. Right now it seemed to be a contest between Carothers and Riddell.

Jay Wylie had danced with Donna a few times at the Whetrock dances. He was bashful around girls and if they teased or flirted with him or snubbed him he got scared and broke into a cold sweat and stampeded. Donna had never embarrassed him. She treated him with an easy friendliness, and he liked her a lot. But he felt awkward now when he saw her watching him there in the crowded courtroom. She wasn't smiling; her dark eyes were clouded.

He felt her looking at him when he stood up. And the judge told him he was guilty. The Court sentenced him to prison. From five to fifteen years.

From five to fifteen years inside the four-foot walls of Yuma Prison. Yuma, where for four or five months the temperature was over a hundred and the muddy Colorado River alongside it made the air humid and sticky and in the middle of the day it got up to a hundred and twenty and convicts were packed in cells without sanitation, the diseased with the well. Yuma, where dying men coughed up their lungs and lay there rotting and the guards were tough and cold blooded. Five years in the Arizona Territorial Prison was worse than a life sen-

tence at Sing Sing. It was worse than a death sentence because hanging is over with quickly.

Jay Wylie stood there on his saddle-bowed legs, his towhead up and his puckered blue eyes looking straight into the steel-rimmed spectacled eyes of the judge. A faint grin was on his clean-shaved tanned face.

The judge asked if he had anything to say.

Wylie just stood there and looked the judge in the eye until a dull flush flooded the grayish skin of the judge's lean face. That judge, as well as did every man in the packed courtroom, knew that this arrest and conviction of old Tom Lackner's hired cowhand was a farce. This feud between the TL and the Lazy H cow outfits had no business in a court of law. And if that judge believed in real justice he would suspend the sentence and put Wylie on probation. But there was no mercy in those eyes behind the steel rimmed spectacles and the prisoner knew it. And he took his punishment standing and with his head up.

"That," the voice of Donna Fernald fell across the hushed silence of the packed courtroom, "is murder!"

The hush that followed was tense. It would take no more than a word or a move now and all hell would explode. The judge looked gray as an old dirty blanket. Carothers and Riddell were standing near the door close together, their backs to the wall, their hands on their guns. Old Joe Fernald seemed to crouch in his chair beside his daughter, his eyes black and wicked.

Lackner had been released from custody and sat in the first row of spectators and directly behind the prisoner and the big red-faced Deputy Sheriff Frank Estes. Old Tom had his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter buckled on. He had an extra six-shooter shoved inside his flannel shirt. He was ready to slip it to Wylie if a ruckus started.

Donna Fernald was on her feet, looking small and trim. She stepped out into the middle aisle and walked out through the door without another word.

The judge's gavel pounded, but not loudly. It just seemed loud. The judge was scared.

"Clear the courtroom!" The judge's voice grated like a saw file.

Perry Smith stood at the back with Carothers and Riddell. He smelled of whiskey and his pale eyes were wary, shifting, uneasy.

"What'll it be, son?"

Old Tom Lackner's voice over-rode that of the judge up there on the raised platform.

Jay Wylie was still on his feet. He shook his head. "Tuck in your shirt-tails, men!" Jay Wylie was the calmest man there. "Just let 'er go as she lays."

That eased the tension. The crowd shuffled out in silence. The judge left by way of the back door. Deputy Sheriff Frank Estes and his handcuffed prisoner and old Tom Lackner were left alone.

"I ain't a-quittin' yuh, son," Lackner said.

Wylie shook his head. "Better git on back to your ranch, Tom. Quit frettin' about me."

"I'll be headed for Yuma with my prisoner," Deputy Sheriff Frank Estes spoke in a barely audible tone, "right after supper."

Lackner gripped Wylie's handcuffed right hand, then turned and walked out.

Estes took his prisoner back to jail.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death on the Yuma Trail

BIG FRANK ESTES wasn't wearing his badge when the jailer let him in with Jay Wylie's supper.

"That damned judge," he said, "and the Lazy H outfit got me fired. Made me turn in my badge. They got an idea that Tom was goin' to stop us along the road somewheres an' I'd let him take away my prisoner. There goes your last chance, Jay."

"I'm obliged, Frank, just the same. You bin a white man all the way."

When the jailer wasn't looking, Estes slipped Wylie a Colt .45 with a sawed-off barrel and told Jay to shove it down into his bootleg.

"That cattle inspector Perry Smith," he said, "is takin' you to the Yuma pen. He might take a notion to shoot you in the back along the road."

Estes left and Jay Wylie wolfed his supper. He wasn't hungry and the big steak

and fried spuds had no more taste than sawdust. But he would need grub in his belly. It was a long trail to Yuma and anything might happen as they rode it. And if he lived, he wanted grub in his belly. He had rolled and smoked half a dozen brown paper cigarettes by the time Smith showed up after dark to take charge of the prisoner. The livestock inspector handcuffed him and herded him outside with a six-shooter.

"I hope you try to rabbit on me, Wylie," Smith said before they left the jail cell. "Because it'd give me pleasure to bust your spine with a .45 bullet."

"How much would the Lazy H pay you for that, Perry?" Jay grinned.

"Plenty." Perry Smith bared his teeth in a flat-lipped grin.

Two horses stood outside the jail. When Wylie was in the saddle Smith unlocked the left handcuff and secured it to the saddle horn, so that the prisoner was handcuffed to the horn, his left hand being left free to hold his bridle reins. Smith then tied the prisoner's ankles together by a thin rope that went under the horse's belly. Hobbling his feet in the stirrups. Wylie said he'd be in a hell of a fix if his horse piled up and turned over and Smith nodded his head and said that was right, that he'd be caught in a hell of a fix. Then they rode away into the night.

The jail was at the edge of town and over on the main street cowmen and cowpunchers were drinking whiskey and augering and their talk was about Wylie's trial. There was talk about tearing down the jail door and setting Wylie free. Perhaps before daybreak they would quit talking about it and the mob would go into real action. But then the jail would be damned well empty. . . .

It was a warm night and a big white lopsided moon pushed over the Whetrocks; the brush and boulders along the rutted freight wagon and stagecoach trail threw black shadows. Livestock Inspector Perry Smith had a short-barreled saddle carbine cradled in his arm and he herded his prisoner ahead of him.

"I hope," he repeated grimly, "that you try to rabbit on me, Wylie. I want to shoot you in the back." And he meant it. Every damned word.

Jay Wylie did not so much as turn his head, and he kept his mouth shut. He was gambling on tough old Tom Lackner being bushed-up somewheres along the Yuma wagon trail. But Tom was counting on Frank Estes having sole custody of the prisoner and Estes had as good as told old Tom that he was willing to have his prisoner taken away from him.

"Don't be bankin' too much," Smith's voice had an ugly chuckle in it now, "on Lackner holdin' us up and turnin' you loose. He's bin taken care of."

Maybe Smith was bluffing. Running a whizzer. But most mebby he was telling the truth.

"The Lazy H," Smith chuckled, "seen to that. Lackner has bin taken care of. I got my orders, I shore want you to try to rabbit on me, Wylie—and that's a fact."

Wylie heard the faint *pop* of a pulled cork and the gurgle of the tilted bottle. Smith had a yellow belly and was using whiskey to keep the fear in his guts thawed out. When he got drunk enough he was going to shoot his prisoner in the back and fetch him back to Whetrock dead. He'd tell how Wylie had made an attempt to escape and he had fired to stop him.

Wylie had the sawed-off six-shooter shoved down in the leg of his left boot. Jay was left-handed. It had come natural to use the leg of the left boot to hide the gun. He was thankful for that now because his right hand was handcuffed to his saddle horn. But that gun wasn't going one damn bit of help unless Smith got careless. And that livestock inspector was too scared, even of a handcuffed and leg-hobbled prisoner, to get careless. Unless that booze got him drunk enough to where he imagined he was a hell of a brave man.

Anyhow Smith wasn't ready to kill his prisoner. Not yet. He wanted to cuss out Jay Wylie for a few miles. Taunt him. And do some bragging about himself.

For several miles that took the better part of an hour to ride at a running walk, Wylie sat tight in his saddle and listened to Smith curse him from behind. He took it in silence.

WYLIE'S silence was more infuriating than if he had given the officer back talk. Perry Smith finally couldn't stand it any longer and he rode up alongside on Jay's right so that he could watch the

expression on his prisoner's face. He continued his foul-mouthed cursing. He had shoved the carbine into its saddle scabbard and now he had a six-shooter in his right hand. When the manacled prisoner neither opened his tight-lipped mouth or favored his captor with so much as a sidelong glance, Smith's fury mounted to the breaking pitch. He leaned sideways, crowding his horse against the prisoner's horse till their tapadero-covered stirrups scraped. His open-handed slap was a vicious swing. Wylie knew it was coming. He twisted his face the other way and the open-handed blow struck the back of his head and knocked his hat off onto the ground.

Jay went over sideways. His left hand let go the knotted bridle reins. And his left arm went out like he was grabbing for his falling hat.

He heard Smith's drunken laugh. "Never mind your hat, Wylie. You won't need no hat where you're a-goin'."

Wylie's manacled right hand gripped the flat broad top of his saddle horn. He pulled himself erect in the saddle. Then his left hand came up from his boot top. It gripped the butt of the sawed-off six-shooter. The gun never actually showed. It was between the saddle fork and his belly and shadowed there.

Perhaps Smith heard the *click-click* of the gun hammer thumbed back. And that was the last sound the half-drunken livestock inspector heard on this earth. A man don't hear the sound of the shot that blows his brains out through his bullet-shattered skull. The .45 slug tore a gap in Smith's grinning teeth. It tore a hole in his hat crown where it came out.

Both horses spooked. Wylie's TL gelding jumped and stampeded and for a few minutes he was busy getting the frightened horse reined up and turned around.

Perry Smith lay sprawled dead on the ground. His dead hand still gripped his six-shooter. The nickel-plated law badge pinned to his shirt glittered in the moonlight. Smith's saddled horse had stopped, bridle reins fouled in the brush.

It was an almost comical problem now for Wylie. His feet were hobbled in the stirrups. His right wrist was handcuffed to his saddle horn. He shoved the sawed-off six-shooter into the waistband of his levis and bent down to untie the rope around his left boot. He got it untied. The loose end of the rope trailed on the ground. He couldn't reach his right boot. So he had to unsaddle and fall off and pull the saddle with him. And hang onto his bridle reins when he fell. Perry Smith would have the key to the handcuffs in his pocket.

Jay Wylie was reaching for the latigo that held his cinch tight when he remembered something Perry Smith had said during his whiskey talk.

"I left the key to them handcuffs back at the jail house, Wylie—on purpose. If ever you reach the Yuma pen, they'll have to cut you loose from your saddle horn with a hacksaw."

Wylie had to lean over and twist to reach his right stirrup with his left hand but he finally got the rope untied. He had both feet free in the stirrups. It didn't do him too much good because his right wrist was still handcuffed to the saddle horn and the steel had rubbed his flesh raw. But he felt better with both feet free. And he had the use of his left arm and hand. A six-shooter with five cartridges left. A good TL gelding under him. A man can't ask for too much. He was getting off almighty lucky.

Then he heard the pounding of shod hoofs back along the wagon road. Somebody was coming from Whetrock and whoever it was was riding hard. It could be Lackner but most likely it was some of the Lazy H outfit. It sounded like no more than one horse. One horse and one rider. Jay Wylie rode in behind the brush and boulders and waited, his sawed-off gun gripped in his left hand.

Horse and rider came abruptly into sight. The animal slid to a halt at the sight of the dead livestock inspector sprawled there on the wagon trail. Wylie felt his pulse pounding. He still had the gun gripped in his hand when he called out in a voice he tried to make sound casual, "Take 'er easy, Donna."

Donna Fernald stiffened in her saddle and let out a sharp-edged cry. Wylie rode out from behind the heavy manzanita thicket and shoved the gun back into the waistband of his levis before she could see it.

Donna's face was as white as alkali and her freckles smudged it. Her eyes were

pools of dark light. "Where's Dad?" Her voice was a croaking whisper. "Where is my father?"

"Hard to tell. Should I know where Joe might be?"

"Didn't my dad do that?" She stared at the dead man in the road.

"Perry Smith," said Wylie, "wasn't much to look at even when he was alive. And he's messed up now. Why don't you quit starin' at him?"

"My dad—"

"Ain't bin within miles of here that I know of. And you better turn that pony around and git for town. This ain't no place for a lady."

Donna was staring at him now. She saw the butt of his six-shooter where he'd shoved the gun down in front of his lean belly. She saw his right hand manacled to the saddle horn by the nickel-plated steel handcuffs. She forced a faint smile and reached into a pocket of her divided leather skirt. She took out a small key by its buckskin loop.

"It was on the floor at the jail. I don't know why I picked it up. Maybe it'll unlock those handcuffs."

Wylie grinned and said it couldn't do too much harm to try. She rode close and he took the key. It unlocked the steel handcuffs. He tossed them down alongside Perry Smith's body.

"What fetched you here, Donna?" He put the question slowly.

"There was a big ruckus in town. They killed Frank Estes."

"Who killed Estes?"

"They claim my father killed him. But they lie. . . . And my dad's not there to defend himself against the murder charge. He's disappeared and I don't know what's become of Tom Lackner. They say he was shot and killed somewhere along this Yuma wagon trail—bushwhacked by the Lazy H outfit. A lot of men broke into the jail. You were gone. They dragged the judge out of bed and he told them that this livestock inspector had taken you and started for Yuma. I found this key on the jail floor when I followed the mob there. I trailed you. When I heard that shot, it scared me."

"Scared you so bad," Wylie grinned, "that you kept on a-comin' along at a high run."

"THERE'S a lot of ugly talk," Donna Fernald said. "A lot of it centers around Joe Fernald. He ramrods the Lazy H. Carothers and Riddell are supposed to be taking their orders from my father. The talk said that the Lazy H had told Perry Smith to kill you on the trail. That Joe Fernald had given Smith those orders. I had to find out for myself, so I followed you and Smith. When I rode up on this dead thing I thought it was you . . ."

"And you figured Joe Fernald was somewheres around here."

"I don't know," Donna said. "I've listened to so many stories I'm confused. Joe Fernald and Zeke Carothers and Clyde Riddell have gone. They rode away from town after dark. But they left plenty of Lazy H cowhands there in town to cover their trail and handle their end of any ruckus that broke out. Whetrock is hell torn loose from its hinges tonight."

"I better git back there," Wylie said. "I got to find out what's happened to old Tom."

"Don't go back there!" Donna Fernald's voice was sharp. "They'll kill you if you show up there. The Lazy H has taken over Whetrock. They'll shoot you on sight. Did you kill Smith?"

"You bet I killed him. I killed him like I'd kill a skunk."

"You killed a law officer. That's a law badge pinned on his body. No matter what kind of a man Smith was, he wore a law badge. The law will hang you for that."

Donna Fernald was right. One hundred per cent right. She had a lot of her father's shrewd traits. And it took more than the gruesome sight of that dead man to cloud her thinking.

"You got a raw deal, Jay." The color was back in her face now. "I'm glad you're free. But I don't want you gunning for Joe Fernald. There's never been much in the way of fatherly love or affection and I cut loose from him and his ranch as soon as I could make my own living. But, after all, Joe is my father. I don't want you to kill him, and I don't want you killed by Joe or Carothers or Riddell. You're free. Now quit the country. Ride down into Mexico . . . anywhere. Don't come back, ever. I won't tell anything to anybody. Just go. Ride away from it."

"If the Lazy H killed old Tom Lackner,"

Wylie said quietly, "then I'm goin' to shoot down whoever bushwhacked that old cowman."

Nothing Donna Fernald could say or do now would stop Wylie. She read that in his eyes. But she made a desperate bid. "How much do you like me, Jay?" Color came into her freckled face. "How much do you care for me?"

Wylie reddened under the direct look of her black eyes. "I never gave it much thought, Donna. I'm not a ladies' man."

"But you're a man. Carothers and Riddell want me to marry them. Other men have asked me. Now I'm asking you. If you'll ride away from it, I'll go along with you. Right now. Starting from here. We'll keep on drifting. I'll never quit you. I'll share whatever you have. We'll ride away from here together and we'll never come back." Her voice sounded breathless and her face was white again so that the freckles smudged her paled skin.

"You don't understand, Donna. I promised Tom I'd never quit him. That when he was dead, I'd hang onto his TL outfit and look after it like he's ramrodded it all these years. I wouldn't quit him in a tight, dead or alive."

"Why?"

"That," said Wylie, "is exactly what he asked me. And I'll give you the same answer he got: Damned if I know why."

"And you're turning Donna Fernald down." She miled a little. "Cold."

"I'd give anything on earth," Jay said, "to marry you. But I can't break my promise to Lackner. If I did you'd always despise me. You might run off with me and marry me and you'd stick with me through hell and high water. But you'd never respect me. And after a while you'd commence to hate me. And it wouldn't work out for either of us. But I'll promise you one thing. And I never yet went back on my word. I'll never kill Joe Fernald. That's the best deal I kin make with you, Donna."

"Zeke Carothers?" Her voice was low. "Clyde Riddell?"

"If they have killed Lackner," said Wylie flatly, "I'll shoot them two Lazy H hombres down where I find 'em."

Donna nodded her head. "The Lazy H is playing for keeps."

Wylie unsaddled the dead man's horse and pulled off the bridle. The loose horse headed for town. Jay took Perry Smith's saddle carbine and a buckskin pouch full of .30-30 cartridges that hung from the saddle horn. He unbuckled the filled cartridge belt and holster from the dead man and took the six-shooter from the stiffening hand. He told Donna he was headed for the LT ranch and for her to head back for town.

She shook her head. "I'm going along with you. Whetrock is no place tonight for a lady."

"I'm not goin' to any Sunday School picnic."

"I won't get underfoot. I'll go along—or trail you there."

CHAPTER FIVE

Killers' Cabin

A LAMP was burning inside the cabin at the TL. Three saddled horses stood, bridle reins dropped, just outside. Wylie had played a hunch and it was right. The three Lazy H owners were gathering to pick the meat from the TL bones and Jay had a notion they would end up in a quarrel.

Wylie had not taken time to hunt Lackner. If they had killed him somewhere along the Yuma trail where Tom had bushed up to take Estes' prisoner away from him, then nothing could be done. And it was up to Jay Wylie to play the old cattleman's string out. But if Tom was alive, he'd be showing up when the sign was right.

Wylie pulled up when he sighted the lamplit cabin half a mile ahead and below the ridge where the trail dropped down to the home ranch.

"I'm goin' on alone from here, Donna." His eyes were cold. "Will you give me your word to stay here? Or will I have to hogtie you?"

"I'll stay here." She smiled faintly. "Till I'm needed," she added.

He had to be content with that. He handed her the sawed-off six-shooter that had killed Perry Smith but she gave it back to him, butt first. She showed him a .38 pistol she carried in the pocket of her divided skirt. And said she didn't figure on having to use a gun on anybody. That

she wasn't taking sides unless the odds got stacked too high.

"Meanin'?"

"You gave me your promise not to kill my father. I may be wrong, but I'll gamble that he'll side you against Carothers and Riddell. Give Joe that chance if the play comes up like that. Anyhow, Joe won't shoot at you. You can depend on that."

"Why not, Donna?"

"He gave me his promise he wouldn't harm you if you got loose from the law. He's not proud of the deal the Lazy H outfit handed old Lackner and you. He saw you get railroaded because that judge was scared of the Lazy H outfit and did what they told him he had to do. Joe and Tom were bitter enemies. But they fought according to their tough lights. Zeke Carothers and Clyde Riddell called in the law. Perhaps Joe would welcome a chance to redeem himself. So long, now, and take care of yourself, Jay."

Wylie grinned and rode away. Something in the tone of her voice, the softness in her eyes, quickened his pulse. For the first time in his life he had his mind on a girl. And now he'd better get her off his mind for a while because down yonder waited something dangerous and he was going to need his wits.

He sighted the three saddled horses when he pulled up a couple of hundred yards from the ranch buildings. He dismounted and went on afoot with his saddle gun. The cabin door was open, the window blinds up. It seemed like the three Lazy H owners were almighty certain of their safety from bushwhackers. The creaky voice of old Joe Fernald was snarling.

". . . and right here an' now is where the Lazy H splits up its pardnership. You railroaded Wylie to the pen. You shot Lackner from the brush. I don't hold with that kind of dirty dealin'. I'll buy you two fellers out. Or I'll sell out to you. I don't want no part of this TL outfit, the way you got a-holt of it. You're a pair of blackleg sons."

Wylie slipped up through the brush and dodged from shadow to shadow where the ranch buildings offered shelter.

"You ain't got enough money to buy us out, Fernald. We got the whole damn Whetrock range now. And we're hangin' onto it. We wouldn't give you a dollar for your pardnership. Not when we kin take it away from you like we taken the TL." That was Zeke Carothers talking.

"You're old, Fernald," Clyde Riddell snapped. "Old and useless. Time you cashed in your chips, anyhow. And your share of the Lazy H goes to Donna. Me'n Zeke Carothers will contest it out to see which of us gits Donna and her share of the Lazy H. Looks like you done wore out your usefulness, old-timer."

The sound of the two shots blended.

July's Big Novel

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By John M. Cunningham

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Then the Whetrocks were flinging the gun echoes back and forth and the echoes died out.

Wylie crouched in the shadows, gripping his saddle gun. He pulled in his breath sharply. Little old Joe Fernald was coming out through the lighted doorway of the cabin. He was crawling out on his hands and knees with his head lowered and he came slowly, painfully, and he was crawling along like a wounded animal.

"He was beggin' for it, the damned old son!"

Fernald crumpled and lay there on the ground outside the cabin.

Wylie moved fast. He hadn't seen the actual shooting but he knew that he had been eye witness and ear witness to cold blooded murder. He hoped that Donna wouldn't blame him for her father's death.

He had Carothers and Riddell trapped there in the cabin. If he could hold them there. The rest of the way was wide, bare moonlit clearing. And if they sighted him, they'd shoot him down. He was crouched now in the shadow of the old adobe that housed a cold spring. Gripping his saddle gun. Waiting for the two killers to come out.

They had found a jug of Lackner's moonshine corn likker and were drinking, cursing the raw potency of the booze.

"Weaken it with water and it won't knock you down."

"Man needs a drink. Damn it to hell, Riddell, we shouldn't have killed the old man here."

"He forced our hands, Carothers. You weakenin'?"

"Hell, no. I helped kill 'im, didn't I? Like we agreed. Same as when we bushwhacked Lackner. We each used up a ca'tridge. But I still don't like this. Drink up and we'll cart Fernald's carcass off somewheres. Reckon he's dead out there?"

"Gut-shot twice. He wanted to die in the open. We give 'im his last wish. No man kin live long, gut-shot twice. Cut this booze with crick water and it ain't bad stuff, Zeke."

"Don' git drunk, Clyde. We got Fernald's carcass to git shut of. Dump him at his own place. We ain't got all night. It'll be daylight directly. Come on!"

"Take a look at the ol' he-wolf, Zeke. See if he's quit a-kickin'. You might have to knock 'im in the head with your gun."

"Me?"

"You, you purty son! Take it easy, Zeke. I got this gun pointed at your fancy belly. It's gonna shoot. Tonight's the night Clyde Riddell takes the Lazy H away from purty Zeke Carothers. I'll tell Donna you killed her old man and that's why I killed you. And Donna will marry me on account of it. You look kinda sick, Zeke."

SOMEBODY was crowding a horse fast down off the ridge. Down through the brush, shod hoofs kicking small rocks loose. The racket sounded loud in the night.

The two men in the cabin heard it. Riddell was cussing, his voice a snarl.

"I can't kill you now, Carothers. I might need your gun help. And you'll need mine. When we git finished with whoever's comin', me'n you will lock horns."

The light inside the cabin went out.

Wylie was swearing under his breath. That would be Donna coming down off the ridge. She'd heard the two shots and was following them up. She'd be shot out of her saddle if they took her for a man in the night. Or she'd be underfoot, anyhow.

Then Riddell and Carothers made an unexpected move. Neither of them was trusting the other there in the dark cabin. And they came out. They had to step over or around Joe Fernald where he lay on the ground. They grabbed their bridle reins and swung up without touching a stirrup and they were spurring for the brush.

Wylie jumped out into the open. He shouted at them. "Let's fight! Or you want to be shot in the back?"

He fired two quick shots over their heads and yelled through the gun echoes.

"Stand your hands! I kin shoot you both outa your saddles before you git to the brush. I'm Wylie! Remember me?"

They sighted him then standing out there in the moonlight. They changed their course and spurred at him, firing as they came. Bullets whined past Wylie. He jumped back into the shadow and into the open doorway of the adobe spring house.

That rider spurring so recklessly down the steep slant had commenced shooting. The sharp crack of a .30-30 saddle carbine tore the night apart. And Wylie knew it wasn't Donna. She had no saddle gun. The shots were wild. Nobody could do any kind

of accurate shooting while his horse was coming down at a wild run.

Carothers and Riddell were racing for the brush. They'd reach it if Wylie didn't stop them. In order to get them in his gun sights he had to come out of the adobe spring house and around the corner and out into the open again. And every split-second counted.

Wiley went out. The Lazy H men were coming at him, spurring their horses to a dead run. Jay Wylie stood on his bowed legs and his saddle gun was spewing streaks of fire. He picked Riddell for the toughest man; his first shot scored and Riddell jerked in his saddle and Jay shot him again and Riddell lobbed over his saddle horn like a drunken man and his head and shoulders went over along the neck of his horse and he let go his gun and grabbed the saddle horn with both hands. Jay's third shot tore him loose and he pitched headlong. His left foot hung in the stirrup and the terrified horse kicked him loose and he rolled over and lay on the ground. His head was smashed by the horse's hoofs.

Wylie whirled to get a shot at Carothers but he was a second too late. Carothers had reached the brush. But Carothers had ridden into a hornet's nest. Somebody with a gun was there in the brush and the shots turned Carothers back and then whoever was coming down the ridge sighted him and yelled. It was a snarling, croaking yell. It belonged to old Tom Lackner.

"Stand an' fight, you coyote hound!"

Gunfire rattled. Carothers came out of the brush and back across the clearing. He was desperate now; was racing for the shelter of the cabin where he could make a fighting last stand—or dicker for mercy. He lay low along the neck of his running horse, not taking time to do any shooting.

JAY WYLIE dropped the saddle gun that had belonged to Perry Smith. He had never done any footracing but he covered that hundred yards with the speed of a sprinter. He had less than a third of the distance Carothers had to travel on horseback and he beat the Lazy H man to the cabin.

Carothers hadn't sighted him. In his desperate run for the cabin the Lazy H man had ridden blindly. He slid his horse to a halt and quit his saddle before the horse stopped and he stumbled and caught himself and then he tripped over Fernald's motionless bulk and sprawled headlong.

"Git up, Carothers!" Wylie came out from the shadow of the cabin wall, his six-shooter in his hand. "This is you and me. Stand on your legs."

Carothers didn't stand up. He rolled over and the gun in his hand spat fire and Wylie felt the .45 slug sear his ribs. He pulled his trigger and Carothers let out a thin scream; he shot twice at Jay and one of the bullets tore through the crown of Jay's hat.

Wylie thumbed his hammer and the .45 slug thudded into Carothers' huddled twisting body and he kept on shooting. Carothers' shots were going wild. Jay kept shooting bullets into the Lazy H man and then Jay's gun was empty and Carothers lay on his back, blood spilling from his slack mouth. His pale yellow eyes were wide open and glazing in death.

Lackner came riding across the clearing. Old Tom's white-whiskered face was the

TOPS FOR QUALITY
BIGGER AND BETTER

color of old leather. His hat was gone and his white hair was matted with blood. He was hanging onto the saddle horn like he was drunk.

"Looks like you got the job done, son." He let his horse come to a stop.

Wylie helped the old man down out of his saddle and onto the ground. Tom sat with his back propped against the adobe wall of the cabin. Jay went into the cabin and came out with a jug and old Tom gripped it and tilted it and drank the corn whiskey like it was water.

"I always swore I'd never taste a drop of that rotgut you make."

Wylie stiffened. Lackner almost let go of his jug. That voice came from Fernald's motionless body.

"Somebody'll have to feed it to me. Seems like I'm kinda busted up. You a-dyin', Tom?"

"I reckon this is it, Joe."

"I never had no part of the law deal, Tom—ner your bushwhackin'."

"I know. Hell, I knowed that! We'll auger it out in hell."

"Looks like we'll reach there about the same time, Tom."

Donna rode out of the brush and across the clearing and swung from her saddle. She threw down the empty .38 in her hand.

"I smoked Zeke Carothers back out of the brush," she told Jay.

Then she held the tin cupfull of corn whiskey to her father's lips.

"You and Jay Wylie goin' to team up, daughter?"

"It's up to Jay."

"I'd be proud if Donna would take that chance on me."

"No bigger risk than you'll be taking, Jay."

"Looks to me like a deal, Joe." Lackner grinned like a wolf. "Your Donna is gittin' the best man on earth, Joe."

"He's gittin' the finest girl alive, Tom."

"They'll have the TL and the Lazy H. The Whetrocks is all theirs. We couldn't leave the Whetrocks in better hands. You about ready, Joe?"

"I'm about ready to go. Tom."

"Take care of the TL, son. Pension my ponies. So long . . . and good luck to you both. . . ."

"Take good care of her, son. I'll tell Ma, Donna, that I left you in good hands. Come on, Tom. . . ."

"We're both in bad company, Joe. . . ."

Lackner and Fernald died at the same time, game and unafraid of the unknown trail that crossed their Big Divide. . . .

And when they were gone Jay Wylie took Donna Fernald in his arms and held her and her arms went around his neck and her lips were warm and soft.

They dug two graves and buried Lackner and Fernald side by side. Then they rode on to the cowtown of Whetrock. The sheriff was there at Whetrock. He had come from the county seat with deputies. They had cleaned up the Lazy H tough cowhands and now there was some semblance of law and order.

Jay Wylie surrendered himself to the sheriff and told how he had killed Smith. The sheriff gave Jay back his gun. And the judge, no longer afraid of the Lazy H, reversed his own decision and dismissed the beef butchering charge against Wylie.

The sheriff had the bodies of Carothers and Riddell fetched to Rimrock and buried in Boothill.

The judge married Jay and Donna, and Whetrock celebrated the wedding in proper style.

Jay and Donna went to the Grand Canyon on a pack trip honeymoon. Then they came back to the TL ranch, where Donna said she wanted to live.

Wylie had a big outfit on his hands now. The Whetrocks. He had no trouble getting top cowhands. They all wanted to work for Wylie. And Wylie savvied how to run things.

It was mighty good to come home to the ranch where Donna was waiting for him. She was no cowgirl, but she turned that ranchhouse into a home. And after the twin boys were born she wasn't ever lonesome while Jay was away.

Joe and Tom Wylie. The twins. They were learning to ride now on the pensioned cow horses that Lackner once rode. And never once did those old cow ponies so much as shy at a jackrabbit while they packed the twins around.

Somewhere across the Big Divide, old Lackner and Fernald were looking down on the Wylie twins that were named for them. . . .

THE END

Gambler Jesse McComrie must kill a man at sunset; Jesse had the brains, guts, and a gun fast enough to do the chore—but even with that hand, he'd still be betting his life on a measly pair of blind bullets. . . .

Jesse drew and fired once

THE GUNMAN WHO PLAYED GOD

By ROLLAND LYNCH

JESSE McComrie saw Big Bill LeFarge step directly in front of Deborah Anders and stop her against her will there before the Stratton House. Jesse flipped the lapel of his gambler's frock coat back, hooked a thumb in his vest pocket and stepped into the dust and crossed the street. Coming up behind LeFarge, Jesse said, "Is there anything wrong, Miss Anders?"

Jesse caught the instant relief in Deborah's face as Big Bill turned in annoy-

ance. And he saw, too, the quick words in LeFarge's throat choke off and the man's hatred of him settle in his eyes.

LeFarge said, "Can't a man say 'howdy' without interference?"

"Yes," Jesse said, "after he tips his hat. And is spoken to first."

There was a moment's silence between them, for LeFarge, too, was a gambling man and he saw the type of hand McComrie wanted to play. There was that expression in Jesse's eyes that said he'd meet any play LeFarge would care to make. Jesse awaited Big Bill's pleasure, thumb hooked in his vest pocket, openly challenging. LeFarge squirmed a little. He had shown Jesse his hole card: hatred of him. And in that he had placed himself at a disadvantage.

"Your apologies to Miss Anders, LeFarge," Jesse said.

Big Bill made no move. Jesse unhooked his thumb and reached up to hold to his coat lapel. Deborah Anders' quick intake of breath was audible.

LeFarge was an astute man and saw the hand against him was pretty pat. And never one to take a chance unless the odds were in his favor, he turned slowly and swept his hat from his head and bowed mockingly. Without a word, he went up the boardwalk, his back stiff with what little pride was left him, his feet scuffing the boardwalk heavily.

Jesse McComrie touched his hand to his hat and offered Deborah his arm. "I'll see you to the Garvey," he said.

Deborah took his arm and walked beside him, looking up at him as he stared ahead. She wondered at this man's stolidness, for she could feel the strength in that arm and she could sense the agitation boiling within him.

"You didn't have to do that," she said.

"I didn't have to do that," he agreed, "but I'll probably have to kill him some day."

Her words were quick and a little breathless. "Jesse, no!"

He looked down at her, putting his other hand on her arm linked to his. "There is never room for decency and a man like him."

"Jesse . . ."

He patted that arm. "I like it here." He smiled down at her. "It's a nice place. Clean, thriving, pretty. I've helped build it that way. I'll see it remains so. Nice for a home and family."

Deborah looked quickly away now lest he see the crimson rushing into her cheeks.

In front of the Garvey, Jesse detached his arm from hers. "You're too pretty to be a waitress," he said. "You'll always have man trouble, unless—"

This time Deborah did not turn away. She said, ever so softly, "Yes, Jesse?"

"I'm lucky," he smiled at her. "I'll have that stake made pretty quick." He flipped out his watch. "You'll be late."

She looked through the window of the Garvey and spent her disappointment of his quick change of thought. "You'll be in later?" she asked.

"Later," he said and watched her go through the door. The opening and closing of it filled the air with the aroma of cooking.

Jesse turned back up the street toward the Sonora Saloon. The faint fragrance of Deborah Anders went with him. This was his favorite time of day. A powdery haze was settling down and the cool from the far reaches of the range stirred along the street. The hurried clanging of Smithy Beven's hammer rolled sharply through the town as he rushed to finish with the day's chores. The big window of the Stratton House lobby sprayed a yellow rectangle of light on the boardwalk and into the street. A wagon rumbled into town and a group of cowboys from the Bear Claw iron clattered by and waved to Jesse. Yes, it was a nice town: clean, thriving, a place to raise a family. He turned into the Sonora.

Jesse's game had been opened an hour, with four of the Bear Claw boys trying their luck, when Big Bill LeFarge came into the bar. He stood there drinking heavily, shooting a glance at McComrie now and then. Finally, he went out, walking a little unsteadily.

It was eight o'clock when Jesse said to the boys, "Closing up for an hour. A man's got to eat before he takes on the long night haul."

"And maybe a bit of sparkin' with a gal," said one, good-naturedly.

Jesse grinned and took his tally box to the barkeep. The bartender looked steadily at him, then threw a glance at the street.

Jesse flipped back the lapel of his coat and hooked his thumb in his vest pocket and turned away. The barkeep's lips parted a little. Jesse went through the batwing doors rather quickly and put a searching glance up and down the street, lit only by the glare of the street lamps. There were few people in sight. Jesse unhooked his thumb from his vest pocket and let the stiffness out of his body. Then he went down toward the Garvey.

In the alleyway between Fredricks Mercantile and Pete Grew's hardware, Jesse felt himself going down, a blinding explosion in his eyes. He tried to put up an arm as something hit him solidly in the stomach, but that was his last conscious thought.

JESSE McComrie groaned and stirred and voices penetrated his roaring ears. He could make out Doc Mulrey's voice and the quick breathlessness of Deborah Anders.

Jesse opened his eyes. "Pretty dark in here, Doc," he muttered. He put his hand up to his eyes.

"Leave that bandage alone," Mulrey ordered sharply.

"What happened?"

"You tell me," the doc said.

Jesse felt Deborah's hand on his and laced his fingers in hers. "Don't know," he murmured. "Got hit in the dark."

"Bill LeFarge," said Deborah, and there was a woman's quick savagery in her voice.

Jesse tightened his fingers on her hand comfortingly. "Could have been."

"Whoever it was," Mulrey said, "belted you a good one between the eyes with a gunbutt or a sledge. If you haven't a headache your head's harder than rock."

"I have," Jesse admitted.

"Best you sleep it off here," said the doctor.

Deborah ran a soothing hand over Jesse's forehead. "Sleep," she said softly.

"See her home, Doc."

"Sure. Sure. Take it easy, son. Nothing else I can do. I'll leave a light on."

Then they were gone, and only that horrible throbbing in his head was left. Jesse fell into a deep, pain-filled slumber.

When he awoke again it may have been five minutes, five hours, or five days later, he could not tell. He knew it was late of the night. There was no racket beating in from the street. That ache was still behind his eyes, but he pushed it aside with thoughts of Big Bill LeFarge. It couldn't have been anyone else. Jesse had no enemy in the whole of the valley country. And that would be the kind of odds suitable to Big Bill. He flexed his muscles and sat up. He didn't feel so bad, except for his head. He tore the bandage from his eyes and felt the swelling there. Doc Mulrey had said he'd leave a light on. He hadn't.

Jesse got to his feet and groped out in the darkness, reaching gently so as not to knock anything over in this unfamiliar room. A startled exclamation broke from his lips as his hand hit something hot. He stood there stunned for a moment, conscious now of the smell of a kerosene wick in his nostrils. Gingerly, he reached out again and felt the contour of the lamp and its hot chimney. His hand got to the top of it and he spread out his palm, cold sweat breaking out all over him. His palm registered the lamp's heat. He was blind!

Full realization did not come to him immediately. The impact of this knowledge made racing lumps of his emotions and stifled his heart. He reached out again and felt that lamp, letting it burn his hand. Then he drew it back and put both hands to his eyes, trying to scrub away that darkness.

When he finally quit rubbing his eyes, he dropped his hands to his sides and his square shoulders sagged. There was no bottom to the dark pit into which he stared. Then a wildness hit him. Deborah Anders! She must not see him like this. No one must see him like this. He was a man too pride-filled to abide the sympathy and the burden this would place on others. It wasn't right. Get away! Get away before he was discovered!

Cursing, he turned from the room, knocking over a small table trying to find the exit. Blunderingly, he went through the front office and found the door. He let himself onto the street, freezing there uncertainly as a rider clopped by, calling out to him, "Up early, Jesse, or ain't been to bed?"

Jesse waved his hand at the sound, calling back, "Tough night, John."

Then he was getting himself in hand as the horse stopped and the creak of saddle

leather said the man had gotten down.

Jesse dug hard at his memory of things and knew the man had stopped in front of Pete Grew's hardware. Pete opened up early. Then it must be well past dawn. And then he knew it was, for he could feel the light breeze sweeping up toward the Zimbree Range as was its want this early hour of the day. And he could feel the slight heat of the sun nearly fence high in the east as it put its warmth on his left cheek. He had to get away quickly before anyone knew. He was glad he had known the sound of John's voice. He hadn't given himself away. . . .

Blacksmith Beven's hammer began. Jesse turned toward that sound and measured his steps across the boardwalk. Then he was in the street, making his way toward the blacksmith and livery stable. He walked right into the wall in his haste, but found the doorway by feel. Then he called into the shop, "Beven!"

The hammering stopped and the blacksmith said, "Yeah, Jesse?"

"You got a horse that isn't barn sour?"

"Got a good one. Fella rode 'im in day afore yesterday. Ain't been here long enough to know this is home."

"Saddle him up."

"Sure thing, Jesse."

McComrie waited, flipping back the lapel of his frock coat and hooking his thumb in his vest. Beven led the horse out and handed him the reins.

"Quite a bump you got 'atween the eyes," he said. "I heard."

"Nothing," said Jesse. "Nothing." He ran his hand along the animal's neck and along the mane. "How much you want for this horse, Beven?"

The blacksmith scuffed his boots and a trader look came into his face. Jesse could see this plainly in his memory of the man.

"Gotta get thirty-five dollars outa him to break even."

"Little high," said Jesse.

"Maybe thirty-two fifty."

"You're robbing me," said Jesse, forcing a grin, "but I'll get it back in a game some night. See Joe, the barkeep. Tell him I said to pay you."

"That's all right, Jesse. I'll wait."

"Spavined," said Jesse, and felt his way into the saddle.

He dug his heels into the animal's side and turned his back to the breeze blowing toward the Zimbree Range. With the reins slack, he let the horse have its early morning run, then pulled him in to a walk. With one hand on the saddle horn, he reached out and patted the horse's neck. "Wherever you go, son," he murmured, "I'll go along."

THE horse plodded steadily along. The hollow sound its hoofs made on the planks of the bridge let Jesse know he had crossed the Del Norte Wash. Here the road forked and he felt the animal take the one to the left. That would be toward Madal. A good two days' ride. Jesse settled as comfortably as he could in the saddle. And as the day wore through, he realized how long he had sat in the comfort of a gambler's chair.

It was late of the second day when town smells and town sounds came to him. He let the horse have its way and when it stopped, he knew it was before a trough by the pull of the reins and the sucking noises it made. He reached down and patted the animal's neck, murmuring, "Sorry, son. Tough on you." Then he raised his voice a little and said, "Hello."

"Howdy," a voice said startlingly close.

"What town is this?"

"Printed right there on the sign," was the laconic answer.

Jesse raised his eyes, but in the wrong direction and the man who had spoken regarded him sharply.

Then the man said, "Madal, friend. You're blind?"

Jesse flipped back the lapel of his dusty coat and hooked his thumb in his vest pocket. "Yes," he said, "blind."

The man sensed the bitterness and defeat in Jesse McComrie and he bowed his head a little. "What can I do for you, friend?"

Jesse was a long moment answering. Then he said, "A fellow has to eat and should be of some use. If there's a saddlery here?"

"Ol' Mitch Rawlinson's place."

"I'd like a word with him."

"Stay up. Let me have your reins, friend."

The man pulled the reins over the horse's head and led him up the street. He stopped and called out, "Hey, Mitch, blind fella

wants to talk to you about gettin' a job."

Old Mitch clumped up and said, "What about?"

Jesse swung out of the saddle and felt his way to the horse's head. He could tell where Mitch was standing and spoke directly to him. "I used to stitch and tool when I was younger, before I . . ." He paused in embarrassment, "before I took to gambling. I think I still can. Be a little slow at first, until I get the feel of things. But it won't cost you much. Place to sleep, something to eat, a little smoking tobacco."

There was a long moment of silence.

The man who had led Jesse up said, "That's a fair offer, Mitch. You could use a man."

"I'll run my business," Mitch snapped.

The other man sniffed audibly. "Anything else you'd like to do, friend?"

Jesse turned toward the sound of his voice when Mitch said, "You ain't runnin' no business, Paul. Keep outa this. You eat much, smoke much, young fella?"

Jesse shook his head. "Nothing much," he said. "Nothing much left."

"Ain't sleepin' all the time?"

"Not much."

"Fella can't be too careful of who he takes on, you know."

"Mitch," Paul said, "you're damn well goin' to hell when you die."

"My business," Mitch snapped. "Young fella, I'll give you a try. But there ain't goin' to be no fancy grub in this business."

"Haven't much of an appetite for anything," Jesse said. "When do I start?"

"Now," Mitch said and took him by the hand.

"What you want done with your horse, friend?" Paul asked.

"He's yours," said Jesse. "Thanks for your kindness."

"I didn't do you no favor takin' you to Mitch," said Paul, and led the horse away.

IN THE ensuing days, Jess McComrie's fingers and feel became deft. Punchers came from miles around to obtain a Mitch Rawlinson saddle, fancy-stitched and fancy-tooled. The reputation of the rigs grew. But Jesse took no heed of this. He sat before the shop in the sun and worked, staring into that bottomless pit of blackness. Food wasn't too good nor too plentiful, but it was enough. Jesse didn't figure he had a right to ask for much. His world was dead, except for sound and he learned many sounds.

He never forgot Los Rio. As if it was but night and he would awake in the morning, he could see the Stratton House, Sonora Saloon, the Garvey—with Deborah Anders there behind the counter. Pete Grew's hardware. Fredricks Mercantile. The awnings over the boardwalks, the dragon flies darting about the horse troughs. Yes, it was a neat, thriving

SCOURGE OF THE CRAVEN CLAN

Tough Bannister Makes a Law-Dog

By Carl McK. Saunders

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE 15c

town: a nice place for a man to raise a family. . . .

And this day his head came up to a familiar sound. It seemed like one long dead and gone, but it was unmistakable. There wasn't a man in all of Arizona who put a clacking wheel in a spade bit but the bit-maker of Los Rio. As the horse and rider drew abreast of him, Jesse called out, "Howdy, Sam Kittrick."

"Well, if it ain't Jesse McComrie. Didn't think you was going to speak."

Sam Kittrick reined over, swung down and hunkered before Jesse.

"How's things, Sam?"

"So-so, Jesse. You the one who makes the Rawlinson saddle?"

"Just stitching and tooling."

"That's the best part of 'em. Gettin' pretty famous. Rode all the way over to get one myself."

"Talk to Mitch."

There was a long moment of silence and Sam didn't move. Jesse kept on working. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer and asked, "How's things in Los Rio?"

Sam Kittrick spat. "Not so good, Jesse. Town's gone to hell and he's got complete control."

"Who?"

"LeFarge, of course." And Sam stared hard at Jesse. He saw no change in that poker face, no expression, no change of the eyes like he thought he would see. Sam went on, "Place's run down, trade fallen off. 'Tain't decent no more."

Jesse's fingers went a little faster at his stitching.

Sam shifted his hunkered position a little. "He's the he-coon since you left. He don't run no square game like you did. Made everybody kind of wonder why you pulled out so sudden."

The stitching needle went idle in Jesse's fingers.

"Yep, the place has sure changed. Why, Beven can't even go to work in the mornings at his forge until he gets the sign that Big Bill's awake. Claims he don't like the hammerin' while he's asleep. But then you ain't got no interest—goin' away like you did and not comin' back."

Carefully, Jesse McComrie put his stitching needle in the cake of beeswax and said softly, "Go on, Sam, tell me the rest."

"He-coon now, that's what he is. Comes out on the porch of the Stratton House of an evening at five and looks up and down the street like he's God overlookin' all he made. Stands there a-struttin' without walkin'. Sure ain't like it used to be."

"And," Jesse prompted softly, "her?"

"The one spirit he ain't broke," Sam said. "But he will. Got Deborah fired from the Garvey and won't let 'er get another job in town. She's gonna be his woman or starve. Well, each man to his own choosin', I say."

It was merely a gesture, for he had on no coat, but Jesse flicked his hand at where his lapel should have been and hooked his thumb in his tattered trouser's pocket.

"I know what you think, Kittrick," he said.

"Not a-tall, Jesse. Not a-tall. A fella does what his insides tell him to."

"A fella does that, Sam."

In the ensuing silence, Sam Kittrick built and rolled a cigarette. "Let me have one of your matches," he said.

For a moment Jesse forgot on which side of him he had put them down. He groped and, finding them, did not hand them true to Sam.

Kittrick's mouth fell open. He took the matches and lit his cigarette and put the box back in Jesse's hand. Then he said, ever so softly, "I didn't know, McComrie. Now I can see it. I didn't know. How was that?"

"LeFarge," Jesse answered.

"Damn him!" Sam swore. "But, Jesse, you called my name! How?"

"I remembered the kind of spade bits you make," said Jesse. "No one in this part of Arizona puts a clacking wheel in the bit for the horse's tongue to play with but you. I knew you by your horse."

Sam said, "Damn me. . . ."

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"You said a moment ago—'each man to his own choosing and a fellow does what his insides tell him to do?'"

"Yeah?"

"Promise me you won't say a word to anybody about this?"

"Jesse!"

"No ifs, ands or buts. Promise?"

"If you want it that way."

"I want it that way."

"Sure. sure."

JESSE brushed the lint and threads from his trousers and got up. Unerringly, he went to the little tack room in which he had been sleeping. He got on his vest and got his shoulder holster and gun down from the wall peg and put them on. Then he drew on his dusty gambler's frock coat. Flipping the lapel back and hooking his thumb in his vest pocket, he came back out front.

Sam Kittrick said, "Goin' somewhere, Jesse?"

There was expression in McComrie's face this time. "I've got to *see* a man," he said, and judging by the street sounds turned and went toward the Madal livery stable.

There, he said, "Nick, I need a horse that'll take me to Los Rio. Got one handy?"

"Sure thing, Jesse. Got one that was corral-raised there. He'll head for Beven's place."

"Saddle him up."

When Nick brought the horse, Jesse swung up and lifted the reins. The horse moved down the street. Near the edge of town, he heard the clacking of Kittrick's bit and said sharply, "Don't bother me, Sam."

"But, Jesse, you can't. Bein' blind. . . ."

"My promise was always good to you. Isn't yours?"

"Yes, but—"

"Keep out of my way, Sam. My ears are good."

He felt Sam draw rein and stand looking after him. Jesse kicked his mount into a lope and heard only the wind singing in his ears. Quite a way from town he settled the animal to a walk and judged his time. . . .

The sun was hot on his back on this second day when he heard the hollow sound that was the horse's hoofs crossing the Del Norte Wash bridge. He knew it couldn't be too late, so he stopped his mount.

Getting out his watch, he unscrewed the face and delicately felt the hands with his fingers. Four o'clock. He sat there, holding in his impatient mount for better than a half hour. Then he put his watch together again and let the horse walk slowly on toward Los Rio. The sun was losing much of its sting now.

As he rode his memory leaped alive to the town. The boardwalk on the side of the street where stood the Stratton House began about thirty feet up from Beven's blacksmith shop. Across the way was the Garvey, then in the intervening space was Doc Mulrey's, the hardware, mercantile and the Sonora Saloon. There were four pillars holding up the wooden canopy that shaded the walk in front of the Stratton House porch, he remembered. If a man stood there so he could see up and down the street and gloat over the whole town, his vanity would have him in the place between the first and second pillars on the blacksmith shop side. That was the vantage point to see in both directions. That would be where Big Bill LeFarge would stand. Jesse found himself hoping that Beven's hammer wasn't going when he rode into the street.

And then he was suddenly there. He felt the horse turn toward the livery and pulled him around straight again. The hammer was silent. There were the town smells and the town noises, and Jesse carefully gauged how far he had come up the street from the smithy's. When he figured

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he was within fifty feet of the Stratton House porch, he stopped his horse and swung down, pulling the reins over the animal's head and holding to them as he stood in the middle of the street and faced in the direction of the Stratton House porch. He called out stridently, "LeFarge!"

The town noises died under his voice. Jesse reached up and flipped the lapel of his coat back and hooked his thumb in his vest pocket. "LeFarge!" he repeated in the stillness. *He had to make that man talk!* And if he remembered, LeFarge would say something to stall and calculate the odds.

Then out of the hush came the words: "You made a mistake comin' back, McComrie."

That poker face was on Jesse, revealing nothing. "We'll see," he said. "We'll see. I'm waiting."

Then he had the picture straight. LeFarge's voice placed him in the position Jesse had figured he would be. Between the first and second porch uprights. When he went for his gun, being right-handed he would naturally tip toward the right when he fired.

Jesse said sharply, "You always were yellow, LeFarge."

THEN he heard it. That light slap of hand against leather. Jesse drew and fired once. He didn't need his eyes. He had always drawn and fired by instinct. He felt LeFarge's shot fan close and make his horse rear and tear away from him. Then he was standing there in the street, lost for the moment in this town he knew so well amid the powdersmoke stinging his nostrils. His mount was gone. McComrie could not get away.

Then sounds were breaking through to him again. He heard people running, shouting things he could not piece together. Then he heard them pounding up to him and he heard that clacking bit on Sam Kittrick's horse and he could hear Sam crying over and over, "Blind as a bat! Blind, I tell you! An' he hit 'im plumb center. Followed him clean from Madal. Never missed the road a bit. He's been makin' them Rawlinson saddles. . . ."

And through the rapid tirade, Jesse heard, "Jesse! Jesse, you did come back! I never believed—" And Deborah Anders' cool hands were on his face, her fingers brushing lightly across his brows. She was sobbing.

The shouting had died and all about him was a sober silence, broken only by the sound of Deborah's crying.

Then she was laughing a little and saying, "Jesse, you fool. You darling crazy fool!"

Jesse patted her on the shoulder. "It can be a nice town again. I had to *see* to that. I helped make it that way once before. I'll be getting back to my job in Madal."

Deborah gripped his arm tightly. "You'll do no such a thing. Your place is here in Los Rio."

Stubbornly he shook his head. "I've a living to make. I have a job in Madal. The only one I can do and earn a living. I'm blind."

"Not any more," said Deborah firmly. "From now on I am your eyes. I'll stay with you always."

"Why not, Jesse," Sam Kittrick said. "Ol' Skinflint Rawlinson never made no saddles until you went to work for him. You go in business here and I'll place my order now. I didn't even yet buy one from him."

"There's a place out back of my store to work," Pete Grey offered. "Got needles and thread and leather—stake you to whatever you need to start."

"The McComrie Saddle Shop opens tomorrow morning," Deborah said proudly. "Bring any tack that needs fixing, gentlemen. My man will take real good care of it."

Everyone was talking at once. There was a smarting behind Jesse McComrie's eyes as the people pledged plenty work to keep him busy. But he heard only one person clearly.

Deborah was saying, "It's a nice town. Clean and thriving and a place to raise a family."

"I can *see* that it is," murmured Jesse and knew her cheeks were crimson. And this was his favorite time of day. A powdery haze was settling down over the land and the cool from the far reaches of the range stirred along the street. It was a nice time of the day. . . .

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

JAMES PURCELL

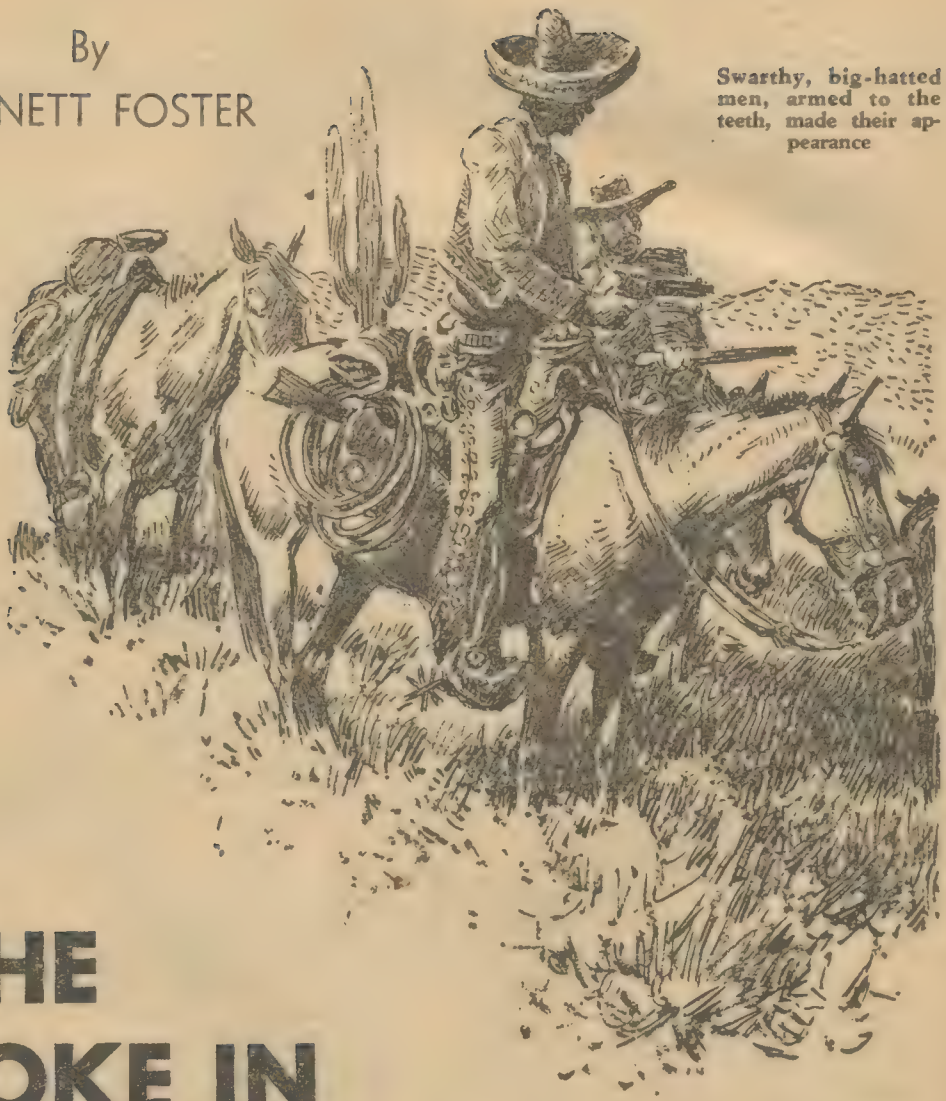
Although James Purcell of Kentucky followed the peaceful occupation of carpenter in his home state, he garnered enough thrilling exploits, when he roamed the frontiers through Arkansas, Colorado and New Mexico, to satisfy even the most adventurous.

In 1802 he set out to make his fortune in the Northwestern fur trade. But he got into a brawl in which he killed three murderous trappers who tried to steal his pelts. As they were Hudson Bay employees, Purcell figured he'd be safer in more distant territory, so fled south.

But he jumped from the frying pan into the fire, because after battling blizzards, floods and Indians, he was nabbed as a spy-suspect by Mexican soldiers near the New Mexico border. Locked in a dirty 'dobe hoosgow, it began to look as if a 'dobe wall and a firing squad would be his inglorious finish.

However, a fire swept the jail, during which Purcell saved a guard who was overcome by smoke. Jim was pardoned and released. He decided to stay on in Santa Fe, and became an esteemed builder and merchant in the Mexican pueblo which was destined to become a thriving American city.

By
BENNETT FOSTER



Swarthy, big-hatted men, armed to the teeth, made their appearance

THE JOKE IN HELL'S BACKYARD

Into that devil's brew which the Widow Fennessy, Dandy Bob Roberts and Old Man Duggan boiled up in Gila City, the uproarious imps of Boothill pitched an Eastern prima donna whose line of gab made bullwhackers blush, a crackpot desert rat from the Apache Hills, and the boot-tough Sisneros brothers, who—after one good look at those fabulous Gila City characters—reckoned they'd be plumb happier dangling in the choking end of a rurale hangrope. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Danger Prescribed

AS SOCIAL arbiter and patron of the arts it fell to Dandy Bob Roberts to quell the riot in the Gila City Opera House. The occasion was the appearance of Madame Simone Tetri, late of the Milan opera and recalled to the United States, so the hand bill said, by popular demand. The time was the end of the month—payday—and the hardy souls who delved for silver ore, or who choused cattle on the sun-baked ranges about town, were present in force. As later reported in the Gila City *Herald* "there were many of the hoipolloi mingled with the cognoscenti."

Madame Tetri appeared in concert. Dandy Bob, befitting his position, occupied a box. His guests were the Widow Fennessy and Old Man Duggan who, so Duggan hoped, were shortly to be united in connubial bliss. The widow was corseted until her eyes bugged out; three layers of powder hid her freckles. Duggan, morosely unhappy in a starched shirt, sucked surreptitiously on a bottle in the rear of the box while the widow and Dandy Bob displayed their finery in front.

Below, among the common herd, perspiring bar girls sought to assuage month-old thirsts, hurrying from bar to customer with many a foaming flagon, many a thick-bottomed glass of whiskey. It was a gala scene, made more so by the arrival in the opposite box of Don Filiberto Paiz, grandee from Rancho Santisima. Don Fili-

berto was a power in Mexican politics and Duggan's friend. Dandy Bob was about to comment upon this unwonted occurrence when the curtain went up. Following a suitable pause Madame Tetri rustled onto the stage. Immediately the widow envied madame her corsets, Duggan forgot his bottle, and a raucous soul in the pit shouted, "Sing *Annie Laurie!*"

Madame bowed to the applause and plunged into the *Suicidio!* aria from *La Gioconda,* which has as many high spots as the Chiricahua mountains. She was a coloratura soprano with a voice that could easily have supported the roof of the opera house.

At the conclusion of the number there was a spattering of applause, Duggan, who liked his women big, furnishing at least a third. The sentimental person in the pit revoiced his request: "Sing *Annie Laurie!*" Dandy Bob, frowning portentously, leaned over the box railing and sought out the speaker. He did not identify the gentleman but he did spot Daffyd ap Griffiths, just in from the Dragoon Mountains and doubtless with money in his poke. Daffyd was a successful prospector and the last time he'd struck town Bob had won five hundred. He made a mental note of Daffyd.

Madame Tetri next sang a group of three German lieder, soft and touchingly sentimental. They appealed to the crowd and Daffyd, Welchman and music lover, closed his eyes and swayed gently. The gentleman who wanted *Annie Laurie* again mentioned his desire in a somewhat thickened voice. There were hisses of protest from a portion of the audience, but he had backers who spoke loudly. The accompanist raked the piano keys and Madame Tetri began: *"Ah, fors' è lui che l'anima,"* loud and long and with plenty of fireworks. Dandy Bob thoughtfully felt of his gun-butt, concealed under his broadcloth coat. Gila City's marshal was not present and through long experience Bob scented trouble.

At the conclusion of *"Ah, fors'"* the audience divided. A few applauded but *Annie Laurie* had her adherents. Daffyd ap Griffiths stood up and stared, stony-faced, at a large man behind him. Dandy Bob had also selected the large man as the *Annie Laurie* leader. Hisses and applause were equal in volume and someone in the back of the house demanded that madame dance. Dandy Bob thrust a long leg over the box railing and Daffyd hit the big man in the face.

Bill Fay, owner of the Opera House, and three bartenders now advanced from the rear. An enthusiast, probably the man who craved dancing, loosed a shot at the roof. Madame Tetri, all one hundred and ninety pounds of her, took refuge under the big, square piano. Old Man Duggan, drunk as usual, and never one to let a woman go undefended, joined her there, his left arm around the lady's iron-bound waist, a gun in his right hand and his be-whiskered face thrust forward combatively. The large man, who was a stranger in Gila City, knocked Daffyd down, and Dandy Bob, arriving, placed his Colt with force and precision against the large man's head. The large man slept, Bill Fay and the bouncers arrived, the bar girls screamed and Widow Fennessy gave a warwhoop and started after Duggan.

With their leader down the *Annie Laurie* partisans lacked unity. Dandy Bob jumped to the stage and, gun in hand, ordered the crowd to sit down, shouting that the concert would continue. Such was not to be. The widow hauled Duggan from beneath the piano, gripping him by one kicking leg. The curtain came down and Bill Fay, knowing the sure way to stop the commotion, shouted that the drinks were on the house. Two men were trampled in the rush that ensued. Dandy Bob found himself staring at heaving backs in place of belligerent faces and, recalling his financial status, hurdled benches and picked up the recumbent Daffyd.

SUCH was the concert at the Gila City Opera House. In reporting the event the *Herald* was apologetic, albeit a trifle stern.

> Gila City has disgraced herself. Madame Tetri, the victim of the recent disgraceful scene, is recuperating from her nervous shock in the New York Hotel, under the care of our popular physician, Doc Speers.
>
> The *Herald* bewails the actions of certain of our inhabitants but, at the same time, can see the cause. Gila City has her likes and dislikes and she does not care for Italian opera. After all, *Annie Laurie* is a nice song.

In its report the *Herald* failed to mention

various important occurrences. Dandy Bob won no money from Daffyd ap Griffiths who, having recovered, departed the confines of a community so inartistic. The big stranger left town, his exodus unnoticed. Don Filiberto traveled on toward Tucson, where he had business of importance, and the Widow Fennessy called off her engagement to Old Man Duggan.

This last matter was forcibly brought to Dandy Bob's attention when, at noon next day, he took his pre-meal liquor. Old Man Duggan came moping into the Rajah Saloon and put fifty cents on the bar. It was so unusual for Duggan to buy a drink that Dandy Bob knew something serious was wrong.

"What's in your craw?" he asked Duggan. "You look lower'n the Limerick Girl shaft."

"The widdy," Duggan said, having tossed off his whiskey. "She ain't goin' to marry me."

"So? Why not?"

"On account of last night. I went under the pianner to help that singin' woman an' the widdy claims I was makin' love to her."

Here was a problem. Circumstances had thrown Dandy Bob and Duggan together on several occasions and, while Bob had no particular love for the old man, he did feel a certain responsibility. Widow Fennessy owned the Limerick Girl mine which, since Dandy Bob and Duggan had accidentally found the lost vein, was a source of wealth. Duggan had attached himself to Dandy Bob and, if the widow called off the wedding, two things would happen: a source of richness which Bob expected to tap would be closed to him, and he would have the responsibility for Duggan. Bob did not want to be forced to look after the lying old whelp.

"You'd ought to of stayed with the widow," he chided. "Why didn't you?"

"Well," Duggan admitted sheepishly, "I never seen no woman like that primmy donny. I wanted to see what she felt like."

"An' now the widow's mad," Dandy Bob said. "Jealous, likely."

"She's sore as hell," Duggan confirmed. "Says she never wants to see me no more. An' she fired me at the Limerick Girl, too."

This was the second time Duggan had been relieved of his job as shift boss at the Limerick Girl. The first time he had been fired for high-grading.

"You got to do somethin' about it Bob," Duggan continued. "You got to get me in good again."

Dandy Bob Roberts swore. Why, he demanded, by all that was good, should he concern himself with Duggan's troubles?

"You will," Duggan said. "Buy me a drink, Bob."

Duggan was possessed of certain knowledge and Dandy Bob knew that the old man was right. Bob Roberts would help Duggan, or else. . . . He bought a drink. Indeed, he bought two drinks and in their consuming studied the problem. "Women," he said, when the second drink had gone the way of all good whiskey, "are sentimental. If you was to go away, Duggan—if you was to be in danger—the widow would come around."

"What kind of danger?" Duggan was practical.

"Apaches," Bob said. "Mebbe if the Apaches was to get you. . . ."

Duggan shuddered at the thought and Dandy Bob shook his head. "That won't do," he said. "They'd kill you. No loss, neither. Maybe if you was kidnaped, or somethin'. . . . I'll study on it, Duggan, an' you do the same."

They parted then, Dandy Bob for the Elite Restaurant, Duggan for the Star Livery Barn where he had once worked as hostler.

RAPHAEL SENA had taken Duggan's former job. Raphael was a bright, upstanding young man with sympathy for such persons as were down on their luck. It being noon, the livery barn was deserted and Raphael and Duggan forgathered in the feedroom where Raphael had a bottle, Duggan drank and thought while Raphael sympathized.

Liquor aroused an inventive streak in the old man. Half way down the quart an idea struck him. The seed, planted by Dandy Bob, budded and brought forth flowers.

"Lookit here, Raphael," Duggan said. "You can write, can't you?"

Raphael admitted the weakness. He had completed the fourth grade in the Sisters' School, he said.

"Then," Duggan announced, "I want

you to write me a letter. I'm goin' to have the Sisneros boys kidnap me, I am. They're goin' to hold me for five thousand dollars ransom. You write a letter to the Widow Fennessy for me."

Raphael brought paper and pencil from the barn office. Duggan worked on the quart and dictated. The result was a masterpiece. Raphael, at Duggan's instigation, demanded five thousand dollars for the return of Old Man Duggan. The note was addressed to Violet Fennessy, and warned that should the money not be paid the widow would receive Duggan's ears, one at a time.

"Now," Duggan ordered, "sign the Sisneros boys' names an' gimme it."

"The Sisneros?" Raphael looked up. "They weel keednap you?"

"Of course not," Duggan scoffed, "but they're the toughest outfit I can think of right now. Go on an' put their names down."

"But 'ow," Raphael persisted, "eef the Sisneros do not keednap you, weel you be keednap?"

"I'll get a friend to take me offen the stage."

"An' theese Weedow Fennessy? She weel pay the money?"

"Sure," Duggan felt large and cheerful. "She'll pay. She don't think no more of me than she does of her right arm."

"An' eef the Sisneros keednap you they weel get pay?"

"Yeah. *If* they kidnaped me. But they ain't goin' to. Go on an' put their names down an' gimme the note. An' you keep still about this, Raphael. You keep your mouth shut, hear me?"

Raphael signed two names and passed the paper over. "Theese keednap ees profitable beesiness," he said wistfully.

"You're damn' right." Duggan gave Raphael a dollar and pocketed the note. "Now you keep shut, Raphael. So long." Bottle still in hand, he left the livery barn.

He went home, to Dandy Bob's solitary adobe at the edge of town. There he killed the bottle and, finding more whiskey on hand, saw that it, too, was not wasted. He thought as he drank and, when he finally passed out, was hazy but pleased concerning his whole plan. He would get Dandy Bob to stop the stage and take him off and Dandy Bob could send the kidnap note. Then, after a suitable time, Duggan would return, boasting of his escape. Surely Violet would reward his bravery. When Dandy Bob came in, much later, Duggan was snoring.

Raphael, when Duggan left, went back to work. Ostensibly Raphael's business in life was to act as hostler, and he played the part. At six o'clock he left the site of his endeavors and, later that night, appeared in Pablo Ablano's cantina, in Gila City's Mexican town. There he drank tequila with two swarthy, big-hatted men and presently drifted out into the quiet night with them.

The three talked and smoked and, after a time, Raphael's companions left, riding south on chunky Mexican ponies, their big, roweled spurs jingling. Raphael went back to Pablo's and had another drink, well pleased with himself. As hostler at the Star he was able to keep an eye on things, to note valuable shipments out of Gila City, to hear gossip and glean the news. Raphael was a spy for the Sisneros brothers, a most valuable member of the gang, and this evening he had conducted a particularly good bit of business. The men he talked with were Luz and Chacon Sisneros themselves and, when old man Duggan was kidnaped from the west-bound stage, there would be no fake about it. The Widow Fennessy was going to pay five thousand dollars to the Sisneros'. If she didn't she would really receive Duggan's ears, one at a time. Luz had said he would preserve the ears in salt.

CHAPTER TWO

A Job at Bronco House

DANDY Bob Roberts, returning to his accustomed seat in the Rajah, found that he had company. Three men were seated around the poker table, the bartender hovered obsequiously, and there were clean glasses and a quart bottle of Chapin & Gore on the green felt. Bob shook hands. His visitors were not run-of-the-mill in any sense. They were from Tucson and occupied places of prominence in that town. Gene Bertram, Tucson's city marshal; Gus Hoehn and Harvey Louthian, merchants of the Old Pueblo, each greeted Dandy Bob, and Bertram invited him to sit down.

"We've been waitin' for you," Bertram announced. "We came down on the stage an' we're goin' back tonight. Have a drink, Bob."

It was too soon after dinner for a drink, Dandy Bob said as he took a seat. It was not often he was privileged to sit in with the mighty and his curiosity was aroused.

"Doin' anything in particular right now?" Bertram asked.

"Nothin' special," Bob answered.

"We're got," said Bertram, "a little somethin' on our minds. There's pretty good money in it an' we thought we could interest you."

"Spit it out, Gene," Hoehn ordered. "Don't beat around the bush. We've got a job for you, Bob. We want you to take over Bronco House."

Bronco House, thirty miles from Gila City, was a deserted ranch at the end of the Dragoons and close to the Border. There were tales concerning the place; strange things were said to happen there. Dandy Bob leaned forward.

"Gus an' Harvey an' me are doin' a little tradin' these days," Bertram said. "We're tradin' goods for 'dobie dollars."

Dandy Bob sat back again. He knew now what this was all about. Smuggling along the Border was a well-organized, almost recognized business. No one looked down on a smuggler. To take calico and iron pots, weapons and ammunition, the various products of the United States, and trade them for big, silver *pesos* was both lucrative and acceptable. Why pay import duty to the government of Porforio Diaz when the Border was long and the nights were dark?

"Yeah?" Bob said.

"That's right," Bertram nodded agreement. "We've been sellin' in Mexico for some time an' we need a man."

"Haven't you got one?" Bob asked.

"We've had Soldier Deutch down there," Bertram answered. "Know him?"

"I've never met him," Bob said.

It was true. He had not met Soldier Deutch, in the flesh, but he knew his reputation. Deutch was a very hard case in a country where the average man had to be hard in order to exist. Deutch had received his name due to trouble in El Paso where he had tangled with a half squad of buffalo soldiers. When the smoke died Deutch was riding southwest and the half squad had been extensively reduced.

"We've been doin' business with the Sisneros boys on the other side," Bertram continued.

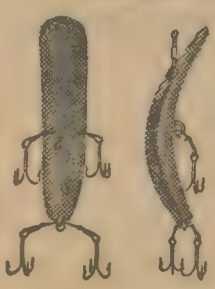
Here again were men that Bob Roberts had never seen but of whose reputation he was aware. Luz and Chacon Sisneros were rising in the public eye. Beginning as simple peons they had successively raided two ranches below the line, acquiring wealth, horses and followers. From that beginning they had branched out, being enterprising. The word was that the last two stage holdups had been conducted by the Sisneros and their followers.

"Kind of tough, ain't they?" Bob suggested.

"You've got to do business with tough people in this trade," Bertram answered. "We didn't want to take in the Sisneros boys but we had to. If we hadn't they'd of declared themselves in anyhow."

To that statement Bob nodded agreement. The Sisneros boys had perhaps thirty followers. Both goods and 'dobie dollars required transportation and, while the average Mexican smuggler was no dove

THEY CAN'T SHAKE LOOSE FROM A FLATFISH!



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of peace, still, he wouldn't stack up too high against the bloodthirsty Sisneros. It was either take in the Sisneros or they would take over.

"What we want," Bertram continued, "is a man down there we can trust. We want somebody who ain't afraid to burn a little powder an' who is honest. An' we been hearin' things about you. We know how you downed Tom Harmes, an' run Press Bell an' Shorty Winn out of the country. We heard how you gave the Limerick Girl back to Mrs. Fennessy when you had an option on it. We know about you tanglin' with the Apaches when you took the mail through to Freedom Hill last Christmas. We figure you ain't afraid an' that you're honest."

THE fruits of unearned reputation were coming home. On each of the occasions mentioned, Dandy Bob Roberts had been forced to react honestly when utterly dishonest motives had put him in a precarious position.

"Unhuh," he said. "What's in this business for me?"

"Money," Louthian said bluntly. "Plenty of money. We think Soldier is knockin' down on us, an' yet we made ten thousand last month. We'll pay you five hundred a month."

Dandy Bob smiled faintly and shook his head. "I want a fourth," he said. "One fourth of the profits."

"A fourth?" Hoehn almost squawled, subsiding as the others hissed for silence. "A fourth?" he said more quietly. "That's twenty-five hundred dollars! That's. . . ."

"Your man Soldier is gettin' more than that," Bob interrupted, "or else you wouldn't be here. Look, gentlemen. You want me to go down an' take over from Soldier Deutch. Soldier is on the shoot an' you know it. He ain't goin' peaceful. You want me to work with the Sisneros brothers, an' they'd ruther cut your throat than look at you. It's one fourth or nothin' with me. That's my word."

Bertram looked at his companions. Hoehn's head tipped slightly and Louthian also nodded. Gene Bertram was no peaceful citizen; he had come to be Tucson's city marshal the hard way, through smoke.

"Why don't you go yourself, Gene?" Dandy Bob asked.

"Because I can't afford to be out of Tucson right now," Bertram answered. "All right. We'll make it a fourth. Let's take a drink on it." He reached for the bottle of Chapin & Gore.

For a while longer the four men drank and talked. Bob was instructed in certain ramifications of the smuggling business. Plans were also made. He would, Bob said, go down to Bronco House and look over the situation. Then, when he knew how many men he needed to take over the job, return to Gila City and hire them.

They took a final drink. "We've just about got time to get the stage north," Bertram announced. "We're leavin' it with you, Roberts. As soon as we hear we'll start five or six wagon loads to you. An'," he paused for an instant, "I hope we ain't been wrong in pickin' you for the job. If we have it's goin' to be too bad—for you. So long."

The Tucson gentry left. Bob, surveying the remnant of Chapin & Gore, grinned sardonically. He was not at all concerned over Bertram's threat. It did not worry him. Ahead glittered glorious opportunity. He would go to Bronco House and take over. He'd take the twenty-five hundred a month too, only, when the goods came down, he might take more. No use slaving in the desert at Bronco House. No use working his head off for the other fellow—for Bertram and Louthian and Hoehn—when there were towns in the south like Chihuahua City and Monterey and Mexico City.

Bob had always wondered how well a Mexican tailor could cut a suit of clothes. Maybe, after the wagon loads had been exchanged for *pesos*, he would just go down and see. There was nothing to prevent him; certainly not his conscience. He was so engrossed in the idea, in the visions of a rosy, albeit dishonest, future, that he failed to note the lanky gentleman who strolled into the Rajah.

The lanky man sought the bar and ordered whisky. "Who is that?" the stranger asked when the drink was poured.

"Bob Roberts," the bartender answered. "Dandy Bob Roberts."

"Oh," said the lanky man, and drank. "I seen him talkin' to Bertram from up in Tucson." He put his right hand into his pocket and metal clinked faintly; silver

dollars clicked against a small gold shield upon which was engraved, TERRITORY OF ARIZONA. RANGERS.

CHAPTER THREE

Kidnaped

BOB ROBERTS left Gila City the next morning. He wore his work clothes, a Colt, a Winchester on his saddle, and, as an after thought, a .41 caliber derringer, tucked into a vest pocket. Before he left he tried to arouse Old Man Duggan, but without success. Duggan snored, rolled over and snored some more, and Dandy Bob, noting that his liquor bottle was empty, knew Duggan was good for some time to come. So, without more ado, he saddled and rode southwest toward the end of the Dragoons and Bronco House. As he rode he hummed a little tune, off key, pleased with himself and the world and entirely unaware that the song he sang was *Annie Laurie*.

Some two hours after Bob's departure Gila City sat up, rubbed its eyes and began the day's business.

The first transaction was accomplished at the Star Livery, which was also the stage station. Madame Tetri's accompanist and manager arranged passage for himself and the diva on the west-bound stage. Madame Tetri had almost recovered from the shock to her artistic sensibilities and wished to shake the dust of Gila City from her shoes. The stage manager sympathetically booked the passengers.

Next in order was the advent of the lanky stranger at the livery barn. The barn boss was surly, due to the fact that his hostler, Raphael Sena, had not reported for work. "He was here yesterday when the stage left," the boss complained. "He was hangin' around Gene Bertram an' them other Tucson fellers while they waited for the stage, an' I told him to go on about his business. I ain't saw him since. I'll get your horse in a minute."

"Has Bob Roberts been here this mornin'?" the lanky one asked.

"I seen him ridin' out of town when I come down to work," the livery man said. "Just hold on to yourself, mister. Or if you want to, you can saddle your own horse."

The stranger wanted to. Within minutes he, also, was headed out of town, riding slowly and searching the ground, as does a man who cuts for sign.

Next in the sequence of events was the arrival of the stage for the west. Madame Tetri and her manager loaded themselves on, the stage pulled out; from the window of her cottage the Widow Fennessy saw it depart, catching a glimpse of its occupants. She sniffed disdainfully. So that woman was leaving town, was she? A good thing, too! The widow went to her kitchen. There, as she worked, her attitude softened. After all, Aloysius had gone to the rescue of a woman in distress. Perhaps his protestations had been true, perhaps he had simply obeyed his chivalrous nature and sought to protect all womanhood, with nothing personal involved. The widow sniffed away a tear, weakening because she was lonely and Old Man Duggan was so brave. Then she set about making gingerbread. One of Duggan's weaknesses —and he had many—was a pan of that brown stuff. Aloysius was sure to come hanging around some time in the course of the afternoon and, when he had suffered a while, the widow would forgive him.

Duggan's plans for the day, however, did not include a visit to Mrs. Fennessy. When he wakened he found himself with a splitting headache, an unusual thing for whiskey did not ordinarily bother him. Moreover, when Duggan looked out, he saw that he had overslept. Dandy Bob was gone and so too was the stage Duggan had planned to take. His plans were knocked into a cocked hat and, surly as a sore-headed bear, he went down town to get his breakfast liquor.

Two drinks fixed up his head but not his disposition. He wandered over to the Star Livery, learned that Roberts had been seen leaving town and that Raphael, whom the barn boss cursed heartily, was absent from duty. Duggan then strayed back to the Rajah. He took another shot and sat down moodily. It appeared that Duggan would not be kidnaped this day. However liquor got to work and fired his invention boiler and, presently, the old man saw a way out.

He didn't need Dandy Bob and he didn't need the stage. He had the note to Widow Fennessy in his pocket. There was nothing to prevent his leaving town, hiring a Mexican to bring in the note and mail it,

and then, in a few days, return with a story of escape from his kidnapers. Duggan's eyes brightened. He liked a lie nearly as well as he liked a drink and he would concoct a suitable tale. Moreover he knew where he could get a messenger and at the same time find a hideout. Rancho Santisima was below the Border, perhaps fifty miles from Gila City, and Duggan's friend, Don Filiberto, would not ask questions but would supply suitable hospitality. Duggan counted his money, estimated it to be enough and, having purchased two quarts and his rations for the trip, went back to the adobe.

As shift boss of the Limerick Girl Duggan had been affluent enough to keep a horse. The job was gone but the animal wasn't. Duggan saddled, collected a shotgun and a .45 Colt and, having bestowed armament and rations on his saddle and person, mounted and headed south. He was bound for Rancho Santisima and, barring Apaches, the Sisneros bandits, or other accidents, would get there. Fortunately, no marauding Indians were abroad and, although Duggan did not know it, the brothers Sisneros were busy. Old man Duggan himself had started the powder train that roused them to activity, for Luz and Chacon Sisneros, with certain of their following, were holding up the stage.

TEN miles out of Gila City, making heavy hauling up a grade, the stage came to an abrupt stop. The nigh leader fell in a tangle of harness and, as the gunshot echoed and the guard and driver arose to offer resistance, a hail of lead swept the top of the vehicle. Driver and guard went down, both badly wounded, and the two passengers screamed in unison. Swarthy, big-hatted men, armed to the teeth, made their appearance. The Sisneros brothers, thoroughly coached and adding a new trick to their already overflowing bag, surrounded the vehicle.

They had come to kidnap Old Man Duggan. Raphael Sena had posted them thoroughly and the Sisneros brothers, always with an eye on business, failed to see where they might not profit by Duggan's plan. But Duggan was not on the stage. When the passengers alighted they comprised only a large, richly-dressed and important-appearing woman and a small, white-faced and unimportant man. The Sisneros were in a quandary. Much Spanish was spoken.

Presently, however, a solution presented itself. Luz, the older brother, stated matters logically. They had come to kidnap, they would kidnap. They would take the large woman and let the small man go. The woman, who looked and doubtless was so wealthy and important, would be held for ransom. The man would go back to Gila City and get the money. These facts were communicated in halting English to the trembling manager. Despite her struggles Madame Tetri was hoisted and firmly bound upon a mule. The swarthy men departed. They had not been gone ten minutes when a lanky individual came loping up the grade.

The newcomer's first concern was for guard and driver. He bound up wounds while he listened to the manager's hysterical recital.

"Look," the lanky one commanded, interrupting, "you can ride, can't you? All right, you're goin' to anyhow. You go back to Gila City. Go straight to the stage stop. Tell 'em what happened. Get a posse started an' have 'em send a wagon out with the doctor. Tell 'em Bert Anstruther sent you. Bert Anstruther, get it? I'm a Territorial Ranger. Tell 'em I've followed these kidnapers an' that I'll leave plain sign for 'em to trail me by. Can you do that?" He moved efficiently to cut the harness from a mule.

It took more coaching but presently the diva's manager had the message letter perfect. Anstruther helped him mount and sent him on his way. Then, turning again to the wounded, he inspected his handiwork. The guard was conscious.

"Go on," the guard ordered weakly. "Git them dirty rotten sons! Don't let 'em get away. Me and Jim'll make it through till Doc gets here."

Anstruther did not want to leave but he had done all he could. "They'll burn the breeze," he assured the guard. "An' that mule ain't loafin' on the way to town. They'll be here in two hours. Three maybe. Sure you'll be all right?"

The guard profanely reassured him and Anstruther rode off, heading along the plain trail left by the Sisneros. Three miles from the grade where the crippled stage

lay the trail struck malpai and became obscure. Anstruther cursed wearily and began the slow process of working it out.

So, in the country west of Gila City, men moved about, each on his own business. Dandy Bob Roberts rode cheerfully, his journey to Bronco House nearing completion. Bert Anstruther searched through malpai for a hoof mark, an overturned rock, grass that had been bent by a passing horse.

Farther south than either of these Old Man Duggan moved along, taking an occasional drink and still congratulating himself on his inventiveness. He reached the Border, crossed it, and as he lowered his bottle, his eyes caught the flicker of a dust cloud rising to the south.

Dust clouds might be caused by a number of things: cattle, horses, men, wind blowing. Duggan speculated briefly on the phenomena and, thinking of contingencies, mentally marked the closest haven as Bronco House. If the dust was raised by bandits or Apaches he would flee there, but, until he knew what was under the dust there was no need to worry. He grunted and rode on.

Under the dust cloud Captain Ramon Garcia of the rurales spoke cheerfully to his sergeant. The depredations of the brothers Sisneros had been forcibly called to the attention of Chihuahau's *gobernador* by Don Filiberto Paiz. The Republic of Mexico, as well as Arizona Territory, was weary, completely fed up with Luz and Chacon Sisneros. And Mexico, like Arizona, was doing something about it. Captain Garcia's troop had spent the night at Rancho Santisima and now was scouting along the Border, searching for the bandits. Garcia, an excellent officer, was pleased with the detail. He spoke again to the sergeant and that worthy, half Yaqui and with eyes like an eagle, lifted in his stirrups and pointed north. Someone rode there, the sergeant said.

Garcia trusted his sergeant's eyes. They would, he said, go and see. A brief order snapped and the dust cloud changed direction. Old Man Duggan did not note the change.

In Gila City the Widow Fennessy took gingerbread from the oven and mopped her sweating brow. A mule pounded past her cottage as she took out the second pan. Where, oh where, was Aloysius? Time passed while the widow and the gingerbread grew cooler. A little posse of horsemen trotted out of town. A wagon rattled past, the driver plying the whip. There came a knock on the cottage door.

"Yis?" said the widow to the editor of the *Herald*.

"I'm collecting, Mrs. Fennessy," the editor said. "The Sisneros boys stopped the west-bound stage and took Madame Tetri. They're holding her for ransom. A posse's gone out after them but just in case they aren't caught we're getting the ransom money ready. How much can I put you down for?"

"The Sisneros is ut?" demanded the widow. "Bad cess to 'um! Put me down for a hundred dollars: Wait, I'll bring ye the money!"

CHAPTER FOUR

"I've Been Waitin' for You!"

DANDY Bob Roberts, having nooned at a water hole, reached Bronco House at three in the afternoon. He had a story ready. He did not intend to conceal his identity but he planned to tell Soldier Deutch that he, Dandy Bob, was on the dodge and headed for Mexico. It was a good tale, well backed. Deutch should be sympathetic with anyone fleeing from the law. Soldier knew what it was to have a posse trailing him.

When Dandy Bob dismounted he thought he recognized one of the Mexicans in the group loitering in front of the long rock house. But he had seen many Mexicans and was not particularly interested. He confronted the hostile faces cheerfully and asked for Soldier Deutch.

El Soldado, one of the loungers said, was inside. Bob walked into the house, pausing within the door to let his sight grow accustomed to the gloom. He heard a soft voice behind him say, *"Está aquí, Soldado,"* and, as his eyes adjusted to the light, found himself staring at a gun. Behind the weapon so competently held, was a large man, a familar man, the man whom Dandy Bob had hit at the concert, the lover of *Annie Laurie.*

"I been expectin' you, Roberts," the large man said. "Take his gun offen him,

Raphael." Dandy Bob felt the weight of his pistol removed. "Sit down," the large man ordered. "You asked for Soldier Deutch. I'm him."

Dandy Bob sat down. He could feel, rather than hear, the loafers slip into the room.

Deutch laughed harshly. "So you was comin' out here to take over my job," he rasped. "That's good, that is. You come walkin' in like a sheep. Raphael heard Bertram an' Louthian an' Hoehn talkin' at the stage depot after they propositioned you. They said you'd come, an' Raphael rode out to tell me. Dandy Bob Roberts! The tough hombre from Gila City! That's a laugh, that is!" Deutch lowered his weapon, glanced at it and then slid it into his holster.

"When you goin' to start takin' over?" he asked.

Dandy Bob did not answer. Neglected in his vest pocket, he had the medicine for Soldier Deutch, but he could not give it to him as yet. Deutch had put his gun away, but Bob knew he was still covered. There were plenty of men behind him. Tough men, too.

"Just goin' to walk in an' kick me out," Deutch said. "Why don't you get to kickin'?"

"Because," said Dandy Bob, "I ain't ready to."

"An' you won't ever be ready to." Deutch got up and walked over to confront his prisoner. "You ain't never goin' to kick me out because I'm goin' to kill you."

"So?" Bob said coolly. He had never in his life been in a closer place than this, nor, oddly enough, had he ever been more calm. Bertram, Louthian and Hoehn had caused this trouble. Their big mouths, exercised on the stage platform in Gila City, had put him in this spot, and yet he was not particularly angry with them. Considering what he himself had planned, there was no cause for anger. Dandy Bob felt a faint regret that he could not carry out his scheme, but that was all. He would, when the time came, take Soldier with him. Maybe another. There were two shots in the derringer.

"An' you hit me with a gun the other night," Deutch said. "You know, Roberts, it's goin' to be a pleasure to stop your clock. What in hell'd you hit me for?"

"Because you was raisin' hell an' I wanted to hear the concert," Dandy Bob answered.

"I wanted that woman to sing *Annie Laurie*," Soldier announced. "That's a swell song. I used to know a girl that sung it. What you got against *Annie Laurie*?"

"Nothin'," Bob answered honestly. "I was kind of hopin' she'd sing it for an encore, myself."

"You was?" Soldier looked his disbelief. "Well, you'll never hear her sing it now."

"Neither will you," said Dandy Bob.

"That's right," Deutch said. "I—say, what's goin' on? What's all this, Raphael?"

THERE was a minor commotion behind Dandy Bob. Someone announced in Spanish that Luz and Chacon were coming. Deutch scowled. "You set still!" he warned Roberts. "Don't you start nothin'. I ain't done with you."

Dandy Bob sat still and Deutch went out. There were many voices outside. Then, before Bob's startled eyes, a woman was pushed into the room: a big woman, a disheveled woman with her hat askew, and angry as a woman can get. Madam Simone Tetri faced her captors and the Middle West was in her voice.

"Damn you!" Madame Tetri swore. "You no account, good-for-nothing, low-down . . ." She continued in that vein. Opera stars, Dandy Bob thought calmly, were not as refined as they might be in their language.

It was Soldier Deutch who stopped the tirade. Soldier seized madame's arm and rasped. "Shut up!"

Miraculously, Madame Tetri obeyed.

Now Dandy Bob had time for others than the woman. There were new arrivals in the room, all speaking Spanish. Bob heard of the stage's being stopped, of the shooting of the guard and driver, of the ransom demand sent to Gila City by the terrified manager. Soldier Deutch, having heard the report of the brothers Sisneros, stared at Roberts.

"Don't that beat hell?" he demanded, as one equal to another. "Now they've got the whole country comin' down on us."

"That's right," Bob Roberts agreed. "They'll not get away with this."

"I got to think," Soldier said. "I got to

do some figurin'." He turned from Dandy Bob and issued orders. Madame Tetri was to be put into another room. So was Roberts. Soldier jerked his thumb at Dandy Bob. Rough hands seized Bob. He was hustled along the length of the room and through a door. Madame Tetri was thrust inside and the door closed. Beyond it, voices rose and fell in argument.

Madame Tetri's modish hat with drooping ostrich plumes lay limp on the floor. There were streaks of blonde or gray at the roots of madame's hair. Madame Tetri's face was contorted with anger. She kicked the door viciously.

"This," the madame announced, "is a hell of a note!"

"Whereabouts are you from?" Dandy Bob asked.

"Chicago! And I wish I was there right now!"

Bob sat down on the floor, leaving the bench for his companion. "It wouldn't be a bad place," he observed. "Better than this, anyhow." He was right about opera singers: their language was just not refined.

"What will they do with us?" Madame Tetri demanded.

"I don't know?" said Dandy Bob. "You'll be all right, though. They won't hurt you." Thus reassured, Madame Tetri sat down.

Beyond the door floods of Spanish welled back and forth, rising in waves, only to diminish. Bob, listening, caught some of it. Soldier Deutch was arguing that the woman should be turned loose and returned to Gila City. The Sisneros brothers, sold on the kidnaping idea, weren't having any. Ransom they wanted and ransom they would have! The odor of hot chili filtered through the door. There was the clink of iron on tin.

"Don't we eat?" Madame Tetri demanded.

"Not tonight," said Dandy Bob.

The light in the room, admitted through a single small window, was dimming rapidly. Dusk had come. Outside, beyond the door, the argument resumed. The scent of burning tobacco seeped in under the door. Reminded, Dandy Bob felt for the makings.

"Roll me one," Madame Tetri ordered.

Bob Roberts rolled two cigarettes.

They were smoking companionably when the door opened and light streamed into the room. Soldier Deutch blocked the light. "Come on out," he commanded.

There was nothing to do but obey. Politely, Bob stood aside for the lady to precede him. When they entered the main room of Bronco House, they found it nearly full.

MOST prominent among the crowd were Luz and Chacon Sisneros, with Raphael Sena close beside them. Soldier Deutch lined up with Dandy Bob. "I been tryin' to get 'em to let the woman go," he said, low-voiced. "They won't hear it. Lissen, if I make a break will you get her out of here?"

"I'll try," Bob agreed. "I can't promise a thing."

Luz Sisneros snapped a command. He wanted Spanish spoken. Soldier Deutch obeyed. Here was the woman, he said. They could see for themselves she was valueless. But the gringos would be very, very angry because she had been taken. They would come; they would surely come.

Why then, Luz demanded, if the woman had no value, would the gringos pursue?

Because she was a singer, and a woman, Deutch explained. Gringos liked to hear her sing.

"*¡Cantá mujer!*" Luz interrupted. "*Cantá por mi!*"

"He wants you to sing," Bob said.

"Sing for these pigs?" Madame Tetri demanded. "I won't do it!"

Luz caught the word pigs, and the woman's angry attitude. His face darkened. "*¡Canta!*" he snapped.

"Go on an' sing," Bob urged. "Don't make him mad. Sing *Annie Laurie.*"

"I won't—" Madame Tetri began, and then, seeing the scowls on the faces about her: "All right. I'll sing."

"Good an' loud," Bob urged. "Let her roll."

Madame Tetri let her roll. *Annie Laurie* is a sentimental song, a song to be softly, tenderly sung, but not that night, not in Bronco House. "*Maxwelton's braes are bonny,*" rang out like a giant bell, blasting, pealing. Eyes widened and mouths popped open. Under the cover of that mighty voice Bob Roberts whispered, "Give me a gun an' make your break."

"Not yet!" Soldier Deutch's voice was

equally soft. "Wait till she gets done."

". . . Where early fa's the dew . . ."

A quarter mile from Bronco House, Daffyd ap Griffith raised his head and listened. A song came to him across the desert, sweet, tempered by the distance. Daffyd got up on his feet and listened. Then, shaking his head in disbelief, he walked out and caught a grazing burro. He knew he was crazy but he would just go and see.

". . . An' for bonnie Annie Laurie, I'd lay me doon an' dee." The song ended. Outside Bronco House a burro brayed, loud and raucous in the silence that had fallen. It was Daffyd's burro, greeting others of his ilk in the corral, but the occupants of Bronco House could not know that. They simply knew that the bray meant someone was coming and that meant danger.

For an instant eyes were diverted from the singer and her companions. Dandy Bob seized the opportunity. "Now!" he snapped. "Give me that gun!"

Soldier Deutch was slow in complying. Perhaps the spell of the song still held him. He moved to obey, but too late. Raphael Sena, graduate of the fourth grade in the Sisters' School, interpreter par excellence, had not been diverted by the burro's bray. Raphael understood Bob's order and his gun snapped out and flamed. Soldier Deutch went down, shot through the head.

It was time for action now, time for the derringer. It slid into Bob Roberts' hand, a little gun, a stubby gun, a gun for close and murderous work. The Sisnero's were close. Luz went down, a hole between his eyes. Bob Roberts' stout left arm thrust Madame Tetri back through the door into the prison room. Chacon went down, his mouth a bloody mess, his neck snapped by the .41 slug. Bob dropped to the floor and swept up Soldier's fallen gun. Raphael Sena, caught by three loads in chest and belly, staggered in a circle, holding himself together.

Horses pounded outside. Into the pandemonium of that lighted room Old Man Duggan thrust his bearded face. Duggan saw Roberts on the floor. Old Man Duggan's shotgun swept up and eighteen buckshot interfered with a man leveling off at Dandy Bob.

"Hold 'em, Bob!" Old Man Duggan shrilled, and drawing his Colt, fired again. He was whiskey brave, filled with liquid courage, but who knew that? The Sisneros gang and the men of Bronco House were suddenly between two fires. Nor was that all. Now others came. Here were uniforms.

"Rurales!" someone shrieked, and dived through a window. There was no fight now, only panic that spread like wildfire. Old Man Duggan battled through the turmoil to Dandy Bob. He wheeled about and faced the room.

"My God!" Old Man Duggan panted. "I thought they was the Sisneros'. I run into 'em on the Border an' they taken a shot at me. I made a ride for here to get away. Rurales all the time."

The turmoil diminished. There were dead men on the floor and living men standing against the walls, their hands held high. A swarthy gentleman, his uniform dusty but unruffled, appeared before Dandy Bob and Duggan.

"Señores—" the swarthy man began, then stopped, for more horses were halting outside Bronco House.

Now there were new faces at the door, familiar faces: Jim Frazee, the Gila City postmaster; Simmons, who drove the mail buckboard; Charlie Hoyte from Freedom Hill; Watson, the assayer, and others. They crowded into the room, guns drawn, and among them was a tall stranger.

"Good gosh!" Old Man Duggan gasped, "everybody but the rangers."

The tall stranger grinned. "They're here, too, mister," he announced. "I'm a ranger. Where's the woman?"

In answer to the question, Madame Tetri appeared. She stood in the door behind Dandy Bob, poised there for an instant, making her entrance, and then with one swift step she reached Bob's side, her arms went about his neck, her lips went to his cheek.

"My hero!" Madame Simone Tetri exclaimed. "My rescuer."

CHAPTER FIVE

Reward for a Hero

IT TOOK some small amount of time to sort matters out. Bert Anstruther, representing the Territory of Arizona, and re-

inforced by his badge, forgathered with Captain Ramon Garcia of the rurales. Garcia, sheathed with politeness, explained the presence of himself and his men in United States territory. He had been, he explained, scouting along the boundary in search of those *ladrones,* the Sisneros brothers. His men had seen a rider who, after approaching them at first, had turned and fled. They had, of course, pursued, and all unwittingly crossed the Border. The mistake was understandable; the boundary was not well defined. It should be better marked, *d qué no?*

At this point Old Man Duggan lost himself in the crowd. He didn't know how close a look Captain Garcia had had at the fugitive, but old Duggan was taking no chances.

Anstruther, on his part, was equally polite and equally firm. He understood *el señor capitan's* mistake perfectly, and surely he would say nothing of it. Indeed, *el capitán* had been most opportune, most efficient. He himself, Bert Anstruther of the Arizona Rangers, complimented the *buen capitán.* And, Anstruther said, he had been on a similar mission. He had been seeking the smugglers and the men who had kidnaped a woman. That was a very serious thing in *america del norte.* The good citizens of Gila City had also been hunting bandits. They had joined forces and, hearing the sounds of firing, come apace.

What, Captain Garcia asked pointedly, was to be done with the prisoners?

Anstruther shrugged. They were doubtless citizens of the Republic of Mexico. He would place them in the *capitan's* tender care to be returned to their native land. The rurale captain smiled thinly and issued commands. The long room of Bronco House began to empty.

When Garcia, his men and prisoners were gone, Anstruther issued orders to those who remained. The bodies must be cared for but Anstruther would come back with laborers and take care of the matter at a later date. The immediate necessity was to return Madame Tetri to Gila City. There were horses to catch, a wagon to be hitched, a ride to make. Men departed on these errands and Anstruther turned to

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Dandy Bob and stared at him, hard.

Dandy Bob and Duggan were together, but Madame Tetri had found a kindred soul. Daffyd ap Griffiths, he whose burro had brayed so opportunely, was caring for her, fussing over her, bringing her water and *aguardiente* in a gourd. Madame sipped her mixture of brandy and water daintily while Daffyd stood by with worshiping eyes.

"How come you to be down here?" Anstruther demanded of Dandy Bob. "Just scouting around?" His voice and questions were abrupt, but the ranger's eyes were friendly.

"Just scoutin' around," Dandy Bob agreed.

"Handy, this scoutin' business," Anstruther commented. "Of course, I was lookin' for smugglers in the first place. I guess we got 'em all. They was goin' to arrest Bertram, Hoehn an' Louthian in Tucson today. We been investigatin' them quite a while. Them an' Soldier Deutch was ramroddin' the deal this side of the line."

"I guess they were," Bob agreed.

Faintly, from far to the south, shots sounded, the rattle of what might have been a volley. Both men listened.

"Ley del fuego," Anstruther said. "Well . . . that's the way they do it. Bad people to get mixed up with."

"Mexicans?"

"Smugglers. Deutch an' Bertram an'—"

"Not Deutch," Dandy Bob stated. "Deutch was all right."

Watson, the assayer, thrust his head into the room. "We got the wagon ready," he announced.

So, from Bronco House, the men of Gila City made their departure, riding as escort about the wagon containing Madame Simone Tetri.

For a time Daffyd ap Griffiths walked by the wagon, then, reluctantly, worship still in his eyes, branched off to go back to his camp in the dry wash, back to his lonely prospecting in the hills. But with him Daffyd carried a greater treasure than he would ever find with pick or rock hammer, for Madame Tetri had scrawled her name upon a piece of paper and Daffyd had it in his pocket.

"All my affection to a true lover of music. Simone Tetri."

If ever he had grandchildren, Daffyd would show them that.

The night was long and the wagon bumped. Dandy Bob rode close and Madame Tetri, leaning out, beckoned him closer. "Don't tell them," she whispered. "Don't tell them I'm from Chicago."

"No danger; I won't," Dandy Bob assured, and pulled away again.

Everyone had his secrets, Dandy Bob thought, even opera singers. And certainly Dandy Bob had his. Anstruther knew why Bob had ridden to Bronco House; he must know for when he spoke of Bertram and those others, his meaning had been plain. The ranger had warned Bob Roberts to keep his mouth shut. Bob intended to. He grunted his disappointment, thinking of what might have been. In a way, he was lucky, a lot luckier than Soldier Deutch or the Sisneros brothers. However, that was small consolation. The smuggling business was blown up, what with men in jail and men dead, and a wonderful opportunity had gone glimmering. He would never make a cent out of this business, Bob thought.

AS THE sun rose the little cavalcade reached Gila City, and Gila City turned out to welcome them. The tale was told and re-told by every man who had gone out, and once more Dandy Bob Roberts was a hero, with Duggan a close second. Once again Madame Tetri sought the solitude of the New York Hotel to recuperate, but before she left she again embraced her rescuer and kissed his cheek. Gila City enjoyed that. There were drinks for the possemen, drinks for Dandy Bob. There would have been drinks for Old Man Duggan save that before he had taken more than one or two, the Widow Fennessy appeared and led him away.

By ten o'clock the crowd had thinned, each going about his business. It was then that Old Man Duggan found Dandy Bob in the Rajah.

Bob was tired. He sat wearily in his accustomed place beside the poker table, trying to get up courage to ride home, unsaddle his horse and go to bed.

"You know what, Bob?" Old Man Duggan planked himself down in a chair. "The widow baked me two pans of gingerbread."

"She did?" Bob said. "Want a drink?"

"Nope." Duggan's air was virtuous. "I quit drinkin'. Anyhow, till the gingerbread's gone. You ain't goin' to have to kidnap me, Bob. I'm in good with the widdy again."

"Kidnap you?" Weary as he was Dandy Bob came half out of the chair.

"Like you said the other day," Duggan reminded. "When we was talkin', remember? You said if I got kidnaped it would make the widdy strong for me again."

Bob relaxed. Vaguely he recalled the conversation in the saloon.

"I had it figured out," Duggan stated complacently. "First I was goin' to have you kidnap me an' blame it on the Sisneros boys. Then I decided I'd just kidnap myse'f. But we won't have to now. I just come around to tell you about it."

Duggan got up. "Wait a minute," Bob Roberts ordered. There had been a kidnaping and the Sisneros had done the work. There was more to this than met the eye.

"I promised Vi'let I'd be right back," Duggan said, and headed for the door.

He was gone and Dandy Bob got up to follow, but more men came in, advancing toward him. He reseated himself wearily. More men to ask questions, to exclaim, to praise him, to offer drinks. He wished they would go away. All he wanted was sleep.

The editor of the Gila City *Herald* led the little group and the editor looked important, as will a man who has a project on his mind. He paused portentously in front of the table and cleared his throat.

"You're a hero, Bob," the editor announced. "Gila City is proud of you. We took up a collection when we learned that Madame Tetri had been kidnaped. We considered it a civic duty to pay her ransom if she wasn't found and released. Now it won't be necessary to use the money that way. We all talked it over among ourselves and we decided to present it to you. We want you to buy some memento of the occasion, something that will always remind you of the esteem in which you are held by your fellow citizens."

The editor could be flowery in speech as well as with his ink. He placed a roll of bills on the table.

"That's more'n six hundred bucks, Bob," a man behind the editor announced.

Dandy Bob looked at the money and then at the editor. The editor stood poised, like a man ready to pounce. Bob looked at the money again, slowly shaking his head in disbelief. It wasn't so. It just couldn't happen.

"Well?" the editor said. "Haven't you anything to say?"

"Yeah," said Dandy Bob, and pocketed the bills. "I have. I sure have. Somebody around here is crazy. I think it's me."

THE END

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WHERE THE GUN-TRAILS SPLIT

Cleve felt his nerves pull taut as he waited, his Winchester crotched in the V of the boulder

By

KENNETH A. FOWLER

CLEVE CATLEDGE stared at his brother from the tight, hard eyes men get peering afar through sunlight. The men were only twenty-four months apart, but although Cleve was the younger in years, he was the older in experience. The wrong kind of experience—if a man wanted to listen to the leaves that rustled around Tontillo town.

Wayne said, "Long time no see, Cleve," and planted himself squarely in front of his brother at the saloon entrance when Cleve made an impatient motion as if to brush past him.

Wayne was stocky, where Cleve was lean and limber as a buggy whip; Wayne had a square, good-natured face, while in Cleve's markedly narrower and high-boned face was a certain tautness, an area of hard aloofness around the mouth.

Six thousand yards away from Cleve Catledge lay the airtight hideout where he could beat the law—and bring hell-on-earth to the girl he loved. . . . In the next minute, he must call the turn.

Cleve gave up trying to make a quick thing of it and leaned back against the wooden awning support of the saloon. He took makings from the pocket of his shirt and moistened his thumb against his tongue, peeling the little oblong rice paper delicately off the top of the book.

Sifting tobacco into the paper, he asked casually, "How's the new job?"

Wayne looked searchingly at his brother. He passed the question and, instead, put one of his own. "I haven't seen you in two months, Cleve. What have you been doing with yourself?"

Cleve had the cigarette lighted now. He tipped back his head, keeping the burning cylinder pinched between his lips. He squinted one eye against the tiny splinter of smoke wavering up from its ash.

"Oh, just junin' around," he answered mildly.

Wayne said, "That's what I thought," and his voice thinned flatly. "Junin' around's your specialty, ain't it, Cleve?"

Cleve took a long drag on the cigarette and then with a quick gesture of irritability clamped it between his thumb and middle finger and snapped it into the road.

"I like to see the scenery change once in a while," he said, clipping the words out with a faint impatience. "A man's young only once."

"He only lives once, too," Wayne said bluntly. "Ever think about that?"

"Not much," Cleve answered negligently. "Why?"

"We're all on a short rope, Cleve. Why make it any shorter?"

Cleve shrugged. "Short and lively, or long and dull. A man makes his choice."

Against the weight of that reply, Wayne's painfully balanced restraint abruptly broke.

"A man also digs his own grave," he said harshly. "Boothill's full of tumbleweeds like you."

Cleve grinned. "It's also full of hombres who triggered before they aimed. I always aim, Wayne."

"You're a jug-headed fool!" Wayne exploded. "You never had an aim in your life—and sometimes I wonder if you've got a brain!"

Cleve said unruffledly, "You don't mean that, *hermano mio*. Let's go in and have a drink. They're on me." He put his arm around Wayne's shoulder, and Wayne stiffened, letting it rest there a moment before he jerked it away.

"I wish you'd listen to reason, Cleve. If you don't want to think of me, you might think about Nancy."

Cleve's eyes hardened. "Don't feed off your range, Wayne. Keep Nance out of it."

"How *can* you keep her out of it?" Wayne's voice pinched thin again. "How can you justify your kind of life to a girl like Nance?"

"Maybe," said Cleve softly, "I don't have to justify it. Maybe Nance understands all about me."

"She understands, all right." Wayne's words spurted now with vehemence. "Maybe she understands too damned well! But you're not aiming there, Cleve. You're shooting wild. And Nance is too fine a girl to—"

"Nance makes her choice there," Cleve cut in sharply, "and I make mine. Then if the rope won't braid—" he shrugged, his voice resuming its former evenness—"well, how can you know that it won't, till you've tested it?"

An angry flush darkened Wayne's face. "I know damned well it won't—if Nance let's you braid it."

CLEVE said with deliberate restraint, "We just happen to be different, Wayne. But that don't change the way we feel about each other. Nothing can ever change that fella. Come in and have that drink with me. It's two months overdue."

"Thanks," Wayne said stiffly, "but I've got to get down to the office. There's a lot of work piled up." He started to turn, then checked himself. His gray eyes swiveled back on Cleve, and when he spoke he brought the words out carefully and levelly past the angry constriction in his throat. "Drop up and see me tonight, Cleve. Let me fix up a job for you before your cinch gets frayed. A man can hold a job and still roll his own hoop."

Cleve laughed. "You worry too much, Wayne. Throw an easier loop. There's always a chance for another toss."

Wayne said, "For me, maybe; for you, I'm not so sure," and he swung abruptly and started up the street.

Cleve's gaze followed him with a somber and thoughtful fixity. Tension wound

up in him as he thought of Wayne's remark about Nance Wilcox. Wayne would like nothing better than to step into the picture there. Yet there wasn't much, if it ever came to a showdown, that he wouldn't do for Wayne, or that Wayne wouldn't do for him. The blood bond between them was strong, but stronger was a subtle alchemy of mutual affection and a memory of childhood days still happily and nostalgically vivid to both of them.

Of their mother, Maureen O'Dare Catledge, who had died when they were still in short pants, they remembered little. Of their father, Big Ben Catledge, they had seen little, for he had been burdened with a ranch too big for his overreaching ambitions, and Wayne, a serious, intense boy, already old at sixteen, had assumed the role of father as well as brother to the younger and more mercurial Cleve. Neither son had been left more than a few hundred dollars apiece when the old Rafter C had been sold, after their father's death, to satisfy a mortgage. But Wayne had inherited one thing from his father that Cleve had not: a stubborn and inflexible ambition, a fierce desire to succeed, where Ben Catledge had failed. But where Wayne had inherited from his father, Cleve had taken from his mother, a restless, impatient woman filled with strange yearnings Ben Catledge had never fully comprehended. Thus Wayne had inherited the Catledge granite; Cleve the O'Dare quicksilver.

Both recognized this natural cleavage in their personalities, but instead of drawing them apart it had seemed to pull them together, as opposite poles irresistably attract. Yet when it came to Nance Wilcox, they were pulling on opposite ends of the rope. Wayne knew that he, Cleve, had the inside track with Nance; the careless smiles Nance had for him held none of the richer, subtler meanings of those she reserved for Cleve. But with characteristic stubbornness, Wayne kept on seeing her—never an unwelcome visitor, certainly, but never one, either, who was ever encouraged particularly in the way he wanted to be encouraged.

Yet Nance, in many ways, was more Wayne's type of person than she was Cleve's. She had Wayne's stubbornness, for one thing, only that was a trait, now, that worked for Cleve, rather than Wayne. Thinking of this, a wry smile twisted Cleve's tight-set mouth.

A fortnight ago, he had stopped off at the isolated Running W on his way here to Tontillo, and now almost wished he hadn't. Things hadn't gone quite the way he wanted them to go. His talk with Nance, in fact, had merely increased the restlessness in him, had planted an uneasy seed of doubt in him.

He had ridden up unexpectedly on her out at the corral, where, dressed in a man's pair of tight-seated Levis and an old cotton shirt with a brass-studded belt girdling her slim waist, she had been preoccupiedly bent over a broken gate hinge, a box of carpenter's tools at her side.

He had slid down from his big cremello and had Injun-footed up behind her. Then his hands had suddenly caught her around the eyes, and he had whispered, "One guess, Skinnymalinks."

She had straightened with a little cry, fluttering like a startled bird as he had gathered her in his arms.

"Cleve!" Something of a bird's nimbleness was in her compact little body; she wriggled out of his grasp and stood eyeing him with a breathlessness that was part shock, part eager excitement. "Cleve, you scared me out of a year's growth! Don't ever do that again."

Cleve grinned. "Not till the next time, Skinnymalinks. Here, give me that hammer. I'll fix the gate for you."

He had put on the new hinge for her and they had walked up to the old adobe ranchhouse together, Cleve's hand planted carelessly on her right shoulder. She had perched on the rail of the veranda and he had squatted on the top step, drinking in her warm, dark beauty with eyes starved for the sight of her.

She had hair the color of a raven's wing, and although she never seemed to do anything to it, it had a natural waviness that looked lovely no matter how haphazardly she tended it. He stared at her hungrily—at her small, pointed face; at the eyes like gray velvet under lashes of black silk; at her small, booted foot swinging negligently from the veranda rail.

"I thought you were working at the Big Nugget," she said finally. "How come you're skallyhooting around out here in Nowhere Valley?"

It wasn't the name of this isolated section of brakes and canyons and bowed-up, granite-topped hills, but it was the name she gave it, and it fitted perfectly.

He changed the subject, easily, carelessly. "You'd ought not to be running this spread alone, Nance," he told her bluntly. "Even with Tad Wilson to ramrod things for you, it's too much for a woman to handle alone. Don't you ever get lonesome?"

SHE met his glance levelly. "Of course I get lonesome. But this is where Dad settled, and it's where I aim to live. A person has to strike roots somewhere, Cleve."

He knew that for a rebuke, and he felt it and didn't like it. "Shucks, it's no fun sticking forever in one place. A girl ought to sashay around a bit. See new faces, meet new people, do new things."

Her voice flattened. "Like what, for instance?"

"Oh, I don't know. But don't you ever get tired of doing the same old thing, day after day? Don't you ever want to do something different for a change?"

"Like you, I suppose." There was bitterness in that, and the next question was the one she had asked originally, the one he wasn't in too much of a hurry to answer. "Cleve, I asked you what you were doing away from the Nugget. Has the mine closed down?"

"No," he said slowly, reluctantly. "The Nugget's doing all right."

"Cleve, you haven't been fired!"

"Not exactly." He took makings out of his pocket and began dawdling over a cigarette. "Andy Folsom and I just didn't seem to hit it off. So I quit."

She said very quietly, "You'd better tell it all, Cleve." A thin quiver ran through her voice. "You're not in trouble?"

"Who, me? Of course not! Old Andy just got one of his loco notions, thought there'd been some high-grading going on up there. Andy's a suspicious old stubhorn. He ought to be tending bar someplace, instead of running a mine.

Nance's voice steadied, flattened out thinly. "What about it, Cleve? Had there been high-grading?"

"Oh, sure. Some, I guess. You can't get away from it entirely, at a big diggings like the Nugget. The owners won't miss it. A little high-grading never hurt anybody."

Nance's eyes clouded. She spoke finally, skipping everything but the single thought his careless answer had impressed upon her consciousness. "Cleve, aren't you ever going to stop this fiddlefooting around and settle down to something steady, like Wayne? It can't go on like this between us, Cleve, it can't!"

He got up. He got up and walked over and picked her off the porch rail, grinning down at her prisoned in his arms.

"How about a bait of grub?" he said. "I'm plumb gut-shrunk, Nance."

She stared up at him, her eyes flashing. "Put me down, you big dunce!"

He carried her through the cool dimness of the house out into the kitchen. There, kissing her firmly on the mouth, he deposited her in a chair.

"Now," he said, rolling up his sleeves and going over to the cupboard, "what's on the menu? How about creamed beef a la Wilcox and a tin of these peaches? I'm so hungry I could chaw on a hunk of whang leather."

Remembering it all, now, a vague uneasiness stirred in him. Nance loved him; there was no doubt of that. And, in his own easy and heedless way, he loved her. But he'd stretched the blanket some, in what he'd told her. He hadn't, for example, mentioned how he'd high-graded a thousand dollars' worth of ore from the Big Nugget, and then, in a single night at Buck Sturdevant's Circulo del Oro, in North Butte, had bucked the tiger till he hadn't had a tail feather left. He hadn't told her, either, how he'd given Buck Sturdevant his IOU for another thousand, promising to pay it back within a week. And he hadn't told her how he intended to get that thousand. . . .

With a sudden irritability, he flung away his cigarette and stared through the window of the Gilt Edge at the big wall clock behind the bar. It was nearly nine o'clock. Lew Shotten ought to be along soon. He shrugged off the thoughts that were bothering him and shouldered through the saloon's batwings. This next stake he intended to get wouldn't be peanuts. And Nance could use a few thousand, to restock Running W.

They'd run it together, make a big thing of it. Then they'd travel, see the world. Nance was too pretty a girl to be left to

grow old out there in the Tontillo country, like a starved desert flower. She'd look right fancy in a silk dress. It struck him that he'd never seen her in one. Well, he would. He'd outfit her in the finest foofooraw that money could buy. He needed just two things: nerve, and a taste for gambling. He had both. . . .

IT WAS called the Canyon de los Gamelos —Canyon of Twins—a dim, narrow corridor that twisted like a writhing serpent through funereal ebony escarpments of malpais and huge, tilted shafts of granite that were like sagging tombstones memorializing a dead and long-forgotten past. A mid-afternoon sun arced above the vast proscenium of the Sabertooth Mountains, resembling a corona of shimmering brass pinned to the blue satin curtain of the sky. Away to the west, the Rebosadero River wound sluggishly through the sandy flats of the Tontillo country, a tan current from which the sun sucked up moist ribbons of haze that taped the cerulean sky with ribbons of pearl.

In all that gray infinity, nothing moved but the two buzzards wheeling lazily in the cloudless firmament and the two horsemen who now turned their mounts away from the Rebosadero and headed across the cactus-spiked flats toward the Canyon de los Gamelos.

The two men rode silently, unhurryingly, lean, slack-hipped shapes in the saddle. But from time to time, one of them stole quick, studying glances at the face of his companion. Finally Cleve Catledge spoke.

"You sure you got it straight, Lew—Sam Ridder's handling the ribbons today?"

Lew Shotten twisted in the saddle. He gave Cleve a long and steady stare. "Not gettin' jiggered, are yuh?"

Cleve returned the stare until Shotten's eyes dropped away from it. "I don't jigger easy, Lew. But I don't want any slip-ups, you understand? This job gets done the way I want it done."

"Well, don't auger about it then," Shotten grumbled. "I told you before, Wayne ain't touched a rein in two weeks. Old Man Yeary's promoted him to office manager."

"You're sure they'll make the run without a shotgun guard?" Cleve persisted. "You think Jerry Homer was giving it to you straight? You think Homer would lie?"

Lew Shotten spoke flatly out of a tightened corner of his mouth. "Homer was in the stable when Yeary told Wayne about it. They been worried ever since that trip when the shotgun guard was fired on. So now they're aimin' to go out a day ahead and make it look like an ordinary passenger run."

"Checks all right," Cleve murmured thoughtfully. "Last month's payroll came up to the mine without a guard."

"We can go away from this walkin'," Shotten predicted, and his tight lips settled into their habitual dark taciturnity.

Cleve, too, fell silent now, but from time to time his gaze strayed to the wiry little man who rode beside him, wondering whether some day his own eyes would mirror that discontent in Shotten's, whether they would become like Shotten's—keen and restless and shot through with that unceasing nervous vigilance.

The thought brought him a vague uneasiness momentarily. Quickly, he shrugged it off. He'd never be like Shotten, because Shotten would never be any different. Lew Shotten had gone too far along the outtrails ever to turn back. And now the pressures on him—the sense of insecurity, the lure of risks for ever bigger stakes—were like a drug he couldn't live without. But all he, Cleve, asked, was just one stake, one good stake. Then he'd be satisfied to quit and settle down. He and Nance would build up Running W, and then they'd travel. They'd kick the old world around a little and see what it was made of. With no fences to hem them in and shut off their view of the alluring, fascinating places which they could now only impatiently dream about, they would find out what lay beyond the next range, and the next. . . .

His thoughts continued to ply restlessly as he turned in behind his morose companion, for they were approaching the canyon now, and the trail had abruptly narrowed. Nine thousand dollars. That would be their stake from this job. And half of it would be his—forty-five hundred dollars in cold cash. It ought to be easy, if Lew had gotten it straight about the shotgun guard. With no guard on the stage, with just Sam Ridder and maybe a passenger or two, the thing ought to be fool-proof.

Lew Shotten's voice was like a stone

dropped suddenly into the dark well of his thoughts.

"East Twin's ahead. We'll have about an hour to fix the deadfall. Plenty of small boulders around there we can use."

They gigged their horses, and a rising impatience gripped Cleve now. East Twin was a jutting granite escarpment pushing out like the figure of a man from the east wall of the canyon exit. Directly across the narrow defile, a similar figure projected, almost an exact replica of the other. Canyon de los Gamelos. It was well-named, Cleve ruminated, as he got down from the cremello and ground-hitched. Then he and Lew were out in the narrow pass, barely wide enough to accomodate the bulging belly of the stage, hauling out rock for their deadfall. . . .

AN HOUR LATER, crouched behind the towering figure of the East Twin, Cleve saw the stage. Still hardly more than a vague cube on the horizon, it was rolling along at a fast clip, a long pennant of dust fan-tailing from its whirling rear wheels. Then it had hit the entrance to the canyon, and was slowing. The mile-long canyon passage was narrow, cobbled by a granite under-layer of splintery rock and shale, and here the driver tightened his reins and proceeded more slowly.

Cleve felt his nerves pull taut as he waited, his Winchester crotched in a granite V of the boulder. Directly opposite, behind the other Twin, the only visible evidence of Lew Shotten was the long barrel of his rifle projecting out from the rock like a gleaming steel arm. A shiver rippled up Cleve's back, and his finger coiled slowly around the trigger of his gun and locked.

When it happened, finally, it came so fast that Cleve felt as if he were rousing from an abrupt nightmare, which seemed to end almost as quickly as it had begun. The driver of the stage, his Stetson pulled low over his eyes, reared back suddenly with a stiff-armed jerk at the reins as he saw the deadfall of rock blocking the canyon exit. At the same instant, Lew Shotten's voice pounded down at him from a cleft in the West Twin.

"All right, driver! H'ist 'em high, and keep 'em that way!"

Brakes squealed and dust blossomed and for a moment Cleve could see nothing but the vague shapes of the wheelers rocking back on stiffened hindquarters. He yanked at the rifle and found it had become wedged in the crotch. A sudden panic seized him as he braced a boot against the rock and wrenched frantically.

The barrel tore loose and he went reeling back. Simultaneously a shot cracked, and the abrupt eruption of echoes battered the rocky walls like a wild explosion of laughter, as if the granite Twins suddenly had awakened from their long sleep and were weirdly mocking him. Cleve cursed, then caught his balance and started at a run down the shale-strewn embankment. Another shot blared, and he stiffened abruptly.

Lew Shotten was stumbling down from his side of the draw, weaving groggily. Suddenly Shotten bent at the knees and fell sprawling. The rifle flew out of his hands and went skittering down the embankment.

Cleve felt his belly draw tight as his glance flicked to the coach. The driver was slumped sideways in the high front seat, the reins dangling loosely through his slack fingers. A fat man with a hard-boiled hat and a quivering little paunch was wriggling out through the opened door of the coach.

"Stand where you are, mister!" Cleve called out, and started forward, the rifle swung up in his arms.

The fat man giggled foolishly as Cleve came up and patted him carefully around the breeches and arm-pits.

"All right, pardner," Cleve said, "go over and squat on that rock for a spell. I'll tell you when you can get up."

Meekly, the fat man obeyed, and Cleve peered into the coach. It was empty. He slammed the door and made his way around the boot and over to Lew Shotten.

Shotten lay half buried in a talus slide, his head cradled against an outflung arm. A tiny worm of blood crawled from a hole in his neck and wriggled slowly down to his shoulder. His eyes stared up with a glassy fixity at blue, empty sky.

Cleve grunted and returned to the coach. He gripped a hand support and swung up to the driver's seat. The driver was sprawled flat against the cushions now, one arm hanging limply over the edge of the seat. Cleve bunched his fingers around the man's collar and heaved him up. As he

did, his heart took a slow aim and hammered a great, slugging blow at his ribs.

The driver of the Tontillo Stage wasn't Sam Ridder. It was Wayne Catledge!

FOUR HOURS later, with nine thousand dollars riding in his saddlebags and the posse still cutting for his sign back at Tonto Crossing, Cleve halted his blowing cremello in a narrow draw and slid down wearily from the saddle. He'd really had an idea, doubling back on his trail this way. But for a while, back there, that posse had really been pushing his tail. Some of those shots had been too close for comfort—the raw nick where a bullet had ricocheted from his cantle furnished grim testimony to one posseman's accuracy.

He hobbled the cremello in a willow motte and made a quick survey of his surroundings. He was at the bottom of a long and narrow ridge, brushy, sparsely-wooded terrain that bisected the valley in the shape of a huge oxbow. Grabbing at clumps of brush for support, he climbed the angular, shale-slick embankment to the top.

Away to his left a hundred, two hundred yards, the Rebosadero ran serpentinely through the sandy flats, its dirty yellow water lapping sluggishly against a dugout tied to a stump in a little alder-sheltered inlet.

Suddenly Cleve stiffened. Like the bright flashes of a heliograph, the sun shafting into the valley drove back a blinding reflection into his eyes. Windows! Then, squinting against the glare, he saw the source of the light—Nance Wilcox's house and big, red barn.

Nance! He'd forgotten he was so close to the Running W. His breath ran out in a relaxing sigh. At Nance's, he would be safe. He could hole up there for as long as he liked. Nance would guard his secret.

His pale eyes gathered a somber vacancy as he gazed out across the smoky hills to the house. Even from here, it looked snug, comfortable, a tiny island of security in all this vast desolation. He felt an odd pang momentarily, then immediately hardened himself against it. Comfort, security, what good were they out here in this God-forsaken wilderness? Change. That was the thing that kept a man eager and alive, that kept the sap running strong in his veins and whetted his appetite for living as he drew back the curtain of each new day. And he'd make Nance see it his way. He'd make Nance understand that anyone with a true zest for life had to be a gambler at heart. The others, those who tried to make life a sure thing, became dull and plodding grubbers, rutted in the monotony of an endless routine. And Wayne, his brother, was one of those. Wayne would end up some day with the weak submissiveness of that fat little drummer who had put the posse on his heels after he'd dropped Wayne off at Doc Hambree's at Indian Gap.

He had no regrets about the risk he had run in getting Wayne to Doc Hambree's. It was a relief to know that Wayne had fainted only from loss of blood, and that the wound in his shoulder was slight.

Briefly, his mind toyed with the idea of making the trek across to Nance's house now, before darkness fell. He decided against it. It couldn't be far—three, four miles, maybe—but for all he knew the posse might be combing those foothills, and the cremello needed a rest. So did he. No, his best bet would be to hole up here for the night, then start out before daybreak.

His decision made, Cleve Catledge moved slowly down the slope and found the motte where he had tethered the cremello. He took his rifle out of the saddle scabbard, slung his blanket and saddlebags across his shoulder, and started back up to the ridge. He made camp in a spot where lightning had uprooted a big oak, leaving a soft cavity in the ground for the accommodation of his bone-weary body.

He ate cold grub-pile—jerky and a couple of hardtack biscuits washed down with warm water from his canteen. . . .

He hadn't been aware of dozing. But, almost without awareness, his body had relaxed against the tree trunk. . . .

The shot jolted him awake, brought him back to instant, nerve-tingling alertness. Immediately two others crashed against the nightstillness.

A cold calmness came over him now as he reached down in the hole and picked up his Winchester. They must have drawn up close in the dusk and spotted the cremello down there. But if he could hold them off till full dark, he could get away. His mouth drew rigid. It wasn't a big posse, three, maybe four men. He leveled the rifle across

the bole of the oak and fired into the night.

Instantly, flame lanced from a nest of rocks a hundred yards away, and his mouth twisted wryly. They wouldn't dare risk a rush, in this light. But they'd try and keep him here until morning, when they could work around him, pin him in. But, come morning, they'd find the nest empty.

The darkness was closing in fast, laying its wavering blue shadows across the ridge. Abruptly, another shot cracked, and Cleve went taut. That one had come from the opposite direction, from his right. They were covering both sides of the ridge, and he was in the middle. He flattened out in his hole and fired twice in the direction of the last shot. He'd keep them busy, if they wanted it now. But he didn't think they would. They'd feel too sure of him. They probably had the cremello, now. They'd probably left a man down there in the motte, just in case.

He made a mistake. He came out of the hole to level his rifle across the bole of the oak again, and for a moment his shoulders were above the arc of the trunk. The shot slammed startlingly, and the bullet was like a hammer-blow, knocking him back. He swore softly, dropping into the hole. He felt of his left shoulder. His shirt was moist. He quickly unbuttoned it and drew it down. The bullet had ricocheted off his shoulder bone, causing an ugly gash. He tied his bandanna around it, knotting it tightly under his armpit, then, without aim, keeping carefully down, he propped the rifle across the trunk and fired again.

No answering shot came now. The shadows had settled finally and it was full dark, with no moon. But now, he realized, he'd have to alter his plan and get out of here. At dawn, they'd expect a move and be ready for him.

It came to him suddenly that he had a choice. Even without the cremello he could make it to Nance's house over there. He'd have to go it easy, down the east ridge, but once he was away from there, they'd never pick him up in the dark. And Nance would hide him until things had quieted down and he could get across the border.

His other chance lay in the dugout he'd noticed, tied up in the little cove down at the river. That way would be shorter, but riskier. It was flat down there, without much cover. And he didn't know about the boat. It could be a leaky old tub some homesteader had abandoned there. It might not get him anywhere, except into the hands of those eager possemen.

HIS shoulder began to throb painfully, and he suddenly felt a little weak, a little dizzy.

Nance, he realized with sudden shock, had been just a dream in his restless thoughts, a dream that never could have awakened to reality. Maybe, in some dim, remote part of her consciousness, Nance herself realized that. Nance was like his brother Wayne. Nance liked security, she liked everything ordered and planned. Nance and Wayne would make a team that would pull together without a hitch. But he and Nance. . . .

He took one last, hesitant look towards the east, towards the Sawtooths, and the little white harbor nestled in the hills. It would be a sure thing for him, that way. He could slip out of this noose, and Nance would hide him for as long as was necessary. It would be a sure thing, for him. But not for Nance. . . .

His jaw clamped. He could never stay hitched. It wasn't in him to take a bit in his mouth. He had to be free to come as he pleased, to go as he pleased. The far-away hills would always look greener. They would beckon to him always, and the wheel of chance would spin, and the tiny glittering ball would stop—where? No one ever knew, but that was what he liked about life, the leap in the dark, the round and golden uncertainty, the lure of the unknown, and the unknowable. . . .

He picked up his saddlebags and looped them around his neck. Cicadas hummed monotonously in the thickets. The faint breeze rustled the dried grass, and the leaves whispered their dark, never-told secrets.

Cleve Catledge crawled out of his hole. A cool, spicy scent of sage stung his nostrils. The warm shadows fell around him like old friends. Silently, carefully, like an animal leaving its lair, he moved down the slope. Like a wary fox stealing out of its den, he crept down the slope toward the dugout and the dark destiny of the seaward-winding Rebosadero. . . .

THEY KILL 'EM QUICK IN CAYLORVILLE!

By

STONE CODY

THE town of Caylorville was drawn as tight as an overtuned kettle-drum. In fact, it was drawn tighter—like a guitar string strained to the breaking point.

Standing on the boardwalk at the edge of town, John Curly and Carla McMein looked as tense and near to breaking as the town itself.

"You've got to declare yourself now," Carla breathed. "Ike Waggoner has got this thing calculated to a hair. There's enough decent men and women in this town to break him, but he's countin' on fear to keep them out of it. If people like you stay out—"

John Curly was white-lipped. "You got to understand, Carla," he said. "Zeke Caton is on his side. Zeke sees his ways to profit. Mebbe he's tied up with Waggoner on a regular deal. Mebbe he's just countin' on a lot of things, like my mortgage. Don't you see that Zeke will ruin me if I go the wrong way. All I've worked and fought to build up, he'll pull out from under me. I'll be broke; just another wanderin' cowpoke. My God, everything you and me has dreamed of for years will be gone. Give me another year or two and I can tell Zeke to go to hell. But now . . . not now!"

"If you're goin' to be time-servin', John Curly—"

A voice cut in on them, singing. It came from up the street, and it went through them in a curious way. It was not a loud voice, yet it carried. It was as though a man was singing to himself in a clear rich baritone which had just enough range and resonance to be overheard.

The tune was gay, rollicking, with undertones of stressed, slow humor in it.

"Oh, some like the strummin' of a banjo in the night,
And some like the hummin' of a voice that's light,
But I like the drummin' of a hoofbeat on the trail
At . . . a . . . trot.
At a lope or a gallop or a good fast run,
On the grass, in the dust, on the malpais in the sun. . .
That's . . . what I . . . got!"

The singer came into view. He was mounted on a buckskin horse with a deep wide chest and slender legs that promised speed. The animal's small, sharp-eared head topped a heavy, muscular neck and his nostrils quivered while his head seemed to nod to the music. It was a horse for a cattle king, but the rider bore no signs of being one. He was covered by a beat-up looking Stetson which might have cost forty or a hundred dollars. His blue cotton shirt had been washed until its color was faded to a robin's egg hue and showed an incipient rent, not quite open but threatening here and there. His horsehide chaps were worn and his boots wrinkled, the heels pared down to about half their height.

Carla McMein took in these details with one glance while John Curly's eyes were fixed, fascinated, on the horse. But Carla's eyes found and held fast to the man's face.

It was an odd and arresting face: lean and long, with a wide, mobile mouth and square-cornered eyes which looked at her with a kind of humorous alarm. They were the eyes of a small boy and of a man who was calm. They had mischief in them.

The Stetson came off in a noble sweep, revealing tousled brown sweat-stained hair. "Howdy, ma'am," its owner said in a slow, liquid voice, "Howdy, mister."

Why did men and women go on living in that hell-hole called Caylorville, where the price of a working puncher's daily whiskey and grub was his manhood—and the price of his freedom, death?

The singer . . . was mounted on a buckskin horse

They echoed a kind of fascinated, but differently fascinated "Howdy."

The stranger rode on and as he rode his voice lifted again, still as though he were singing quite to himself.

"Oh, trouble, trouble, stay away from me.
And that goes double for the minister's fee
And . . . the . . . jail.
Stay away marriage, stay away wealth,
I don't want nothin' while I got my health
But the music of the hoofbeats
On . . . the . . . trail."

The buckskin did a kind of prancing dance to the tune.

It was as though someone had loosened the kettle-drum, eased the straining banjo string.

CARLA gave a little laugh. "Goodness!" she said. "We were goin' to quarrel. John, I know it's hard. I feel like a fool. A woman always wants to hold onto all she's got so I ought to be on your side. But maybe it's because I do want to hold on. You see, if Ike Waggoner wins this thing, then nobody will be safe. Not us, not anybody!"

He looked at her soberly. "Mebbe you're right," he said. "But don't you see that if I go against Zeke, I lose everything, anyhow. If I don't, we got a chance."

But even as he spoke the memory of the easy, rich voice beat at him: *"I don't want nothin' while I got my health."*

His muscles tensed and his jaw set. "Hell and Maria," he snarled bitterly,

"has everythin' got to be upset because a range bum rides in here? The hell with that!"

Carla looked at him with a kind of understanding hopelessness in her eyes. She knew he had felt the sudden effect of this long-geared, easy-riding stranger, and that he was angry at his own feelings—angry at himself. But there was a hardness in him that would not give in. He was ambitious, was John Curly. For four years he had fought to develop his spread, had poured himself and everything he could beg or borrow into it. For almost two years they had been engaged. Carla would have married him, from the beginning. It was hard-jawed John who said no. He meant to give his wife a secure place, a solid life which would spiral ever upward. He had borrowed from the banker, Ezekial Caton, on a mortgage that could be called in at any moment. John had played everything he had to win—land, cattle, wife, affluence—and he meant to win. It was no use talking to him.

She took her hands from his chest. "You'll do what seems best to you, John," she said quietly. "I hope you're right." She turned then and walked away, leaving him staring after her.

The stranger had ridden on down the street and turned in before a hitchrack under a sign which announced:

IKE WAGGONER'S DUST CUTTER!
LIQUOR, GAMBLING AND A FEW SPAVINED GALS

The high, merciless beat of the sun seemed to sear his shoulder blades as he turned into the hitchrack and got down from the saddle. He tossed his reins over the hitchrack, nodded in his friendly way at the loafers in front of the saloon and went in.

The bar, to his surprise, was well-lined. It was one o'clock of a hot afternoon. Folks ought to have been eating or taking their rest with a bellyful of noonday food. But there were more than a dozen men along the bar. The talk broke off abruptly when he came in.

He had felt the tension of this town when he rode in. It was not the first overstrung town he had encountered. But fourteen or fifteen men at a bar on a week day at noon . . . that sign wasn't right.

He went up to the bar and nodded. "Howdy, one an' all," he said. Then, to the bartender: "I believe I'll take whiskey, friend."

The apron stared at him. He was a man who couldn't be called fat as much as slightly bloated. His nose, mouth and jowls seemed slightly swollen. His eyes were creased in by rolls of fat which seemed abnormally distended. His belly swelled slightly, but only as a promise of future magnificence. His chest, arms and hands seemed flabby.

"You'll take whiskey or nothin', stranger," he said, his voice hostile. "That's what we got." He slapped his pudgy hands on the bar.

The lean stranger looked at him a long moment and then reached out a long-fingered, muscular hand. The hand clamped on the bartender's soiled shirt and dragged him up straight and gasping against the bar.

"I told you I thought I'd take whiskey, not lip," he said. "Break out the whiskey." His hand pistoned out, so that the bartender slapped, grunting against the back-bar.

The man stared at him, so nearly goggle-eyed that some of the white of his eyes showed past the puffy lids.

The silence of the bar deepened.

The bartender's eyes rolled toward the other end and a man stirred. He hard-heeled toward the stranger. He was a big man, wide-shouldered, with arms like an apex and two guns slung low on his hips. He halted two paces away and said, his voice grating, "You're kind of too wide in the pants for your size, ain't you, pilgrim?"

The stranger looked at him mildly. "Could be," he said. "How'll you have it, friend—fists or guns?"

The big man looked momentarily startled, then he settled. His big fist hooked out in a blow which, if it had landed, might have torn the stranger's head off.

THE stranger ducked under it and went in with his fists for the belly. It sounded like a tattoo. The big man grunted and doubled. A hook slammed him under the ear, another hit him on the jaw. His cry of pain from the ear blow broke off into a

grunting wheeze. His knees bent and his face slammed down on the floor.

The door at the end of the bar rasped open and a figure appeared there. It was a man not softly swollen, as the bartender was, but fat. The man had a big belly under a magnificent expanse of flowered silk vest.

A black broadcloth coat fitted fat shoulders as though tailor-made. Under the double chin a puffed-out scarf protruded, decorated by a single enormous diamond.

His sharp, intelligent eyes whipped down the bar, took in the prone figure on the floor, stabbed then at the stranger's eyes.

He came in a catlike walk which seemed to make his bulk non-existent.

"What's the trouble?" he inquired softly.

The tall stranger grinned at him. "Damn if I know, exactly," he murmured.

The fat man's eyes wavered. It was for a fleeting second as though he believed the stranger but could not understand.

"I don't like trouble here," he said mildly. "You one of Horse Matthew's men?"

"Who's Horse Matthew?"

"You don't know?"

"I don't know."

The fat man stabbed him with his intelligent, probing eyes. He seemed to come to a conclusion. "Mebbe you an' me had better have a talk. In my office. Foller me." He turned and went off toward the inner door.

The stranger looked after him with the first obvious anger in his face. It was plain he resented the fat man's assumption that he would be obeyed. But for a moment only. His eyes turned to the bartender who was glaring at him. The shadow of a smile came to his lips. He turned to the bar, pulled out a silver dollar and laid it down. He took the filled glass of the man next to him and tossed it in the bartender's face. Then he walked into the inner office.

Ike Waggoner awaited him there impatiently.

"Sit down," he grunted, nodding towards a chair. "Who are you? Where you from? What you doin' here?"

The stranger sat down and put his legs out before him. After a long moment he looked up at Waggoner. "I'm called Jones," he said blandly. "I'm from anywhere. And what I'm doin' here is my business." He paused a moment and his eyes hardened. "You answered?"

The fat man leaned back in his chair, studying Jones. Then he tilted his chair back against the wall. After a moment he said, "Good. Your name is Jones and where you come from, and where you're goin' ain't anybody's business. You know anythin' about the deal in this town?"

Jones shook his head. "Not any."

Waggoner said quietly, "We're up against a showdown. There's a range hog out here by the name of Matthew. He has set out to run not only the range but the town. Today's the day when things'll break. I need the kind of hands that can whip hell out of Ape Carney. The pay's good. Interested?"

Jones looked dubious. "Ape Carney's the gent that jumped me in the bar, I take it. One of yours?"

Wagoner nodded. "What you might call third to me. But I been figurin' he was too high for himself; I'd like to have you take his place."

"I take it there's a second."

"Yeah. Feely Mike. He's in jail. I let him go there for a joke."

"Joke?"

"Yeah. He killed a gent named Franzen that worked for Horse Matthew. This jigger had kind a head for whiskey, hard luck an' poor judgment. You know how a drunk is. First place, he used to wear a gun. Kind of made him proud, I reckon. He didn't never use the gun. But he carried it. Strutted with it, kind of. Well, one day, Feely Mike—Mike's got a wife an' kids in town here—Feely, he slapped the hell out of one of his kids. This Franzen was passin' by. Told Feely he oughtn't to do that with a little feller. You can figger for yourself how that would set with a gent like Feely. Feely told Franzen to yank his iron an' the boy tried to yank it only he had forgot, an' Feely hadn't noticed, that Franzen wasn't packin' it that day. So, it turned out to be hard luck for Franzen."

Waggoner sniggered a little. "Some of the goody-goodies in town was set on arrestin' Feely, so—well, I let 'em. Feely was gittin' some big fer his pants. But what I mostly wanted was a showdown with Horse Matthew. We'll git it at the trial. Either they turn Feely loose, which means I'm topdog here, or they vote to hang him,

which means—well, I aim to make it kind of surprisin' for 'em."

HE LOOKED cold-eyed at the man called Jones. "I've talked frank with you. What do you say? I'm offerin' you fightin' pay."

Jones looked at him out of eyes which were no longer square-cornered but shrewdly and mildly narrowed.

"That there's a proposition," he said. "I'd like a chance to think it over."

Ike Waggoner's eyes also narrowed and his face became ugly. "I talked frank with you, Jones," he purred. "When I do that to a man it's because I think he's with me."

The stranger's face lit up. "I thought you was that kind of a man," he said, with pleasure. "I sure thought so. Well, with me, it's this way. If I decide to accept your proposition, you'll be able to plumb count on me. If I don't you'll be able to count on me keepin' my tongue between my teeth while I think it belongs there."

The saloonman's eyes lightened then darkened. "You better think it belongs there," he snapped.

Jones stared at him for a long moment, then his hand blurred, or rather it simply disappeared and reappeared. When it reappeared it held a gun which he laid gently on the table in front of him. "Friend," he said softly, "I didn't seek you out. Don't try to run any ranny on me."

Without hesitation, he turned his back and walked out the door. Almost automatically, Ike Waggoner's hand flashed to his gun, hesitated a moment and it was then too late.

The man called Jones went out bat-winged doors and the sunlight slammed him in the eyes. The heat outside, now that he had been in the shade, was like a blast from a furnace.

He hesitated for a moment, feeling the strong hunger under his belt and regretting that he had not had the drink he had wanted. He looked down the street and saw the Chinaman's sign and another beyond it which said:

MA GILPIN'S—HOME-COOKED VITTLES

And all at once there was the girl in front of him.

She was looking up at him angrily. "You don't look like a Waggoner man," she said, with the corners of her mouth drawn down.

He tipped his Stetson. "Why, no, ma'am, I reckon I'm not."

Her eyes blazed at him. "I didn't think so! I didn't think so! But they said that you had gone in to talk to him." Her glance turned toward the saloon door.

"It's a fight between the decent people an'—an' thugs!" she cried. "An' there's nobody to make the fight. The marshal's honest, but the judge is a coward unless somebody backs him up. An' the whole town is scared out its wits by Ike Waggoner. Horse Matthew wants to fight, but what can he do with ten cowboys against all this. Waggoner has twice as many men—and they're gunfighters."

She took her hands down from where they had been crossed over her breast and dropped them to her sides hopelessly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I've been foolish. It's only that this is the last chance and you— Oh! I don't know."

She turned and went away from him, and it seemed that she was almost fleeing.

Jones decided for the Chinaman's, having sampled home-cooked vittles before.

The man named Jones sat at the counter, on a stool next to an old-timer who looked not only old but fragile. The old-timer peered at him out of eyes that had to get close to him to be sure. "Stranger, ain't ye? Ain't in fer the trial, air ye?"

"Trial," Jones asked. "What trial?"

"Reckon ye're a stranger, all right. Big trial today." He cackled. "Would of been big in my day. But I reckon not today. Figger nobody's got the heart fer it, savin' that skunk Waggoner."

The Chink put a thick steak before Jones that had been broiled over the flame. It was accompanied by crisp fried potatoes that had almost no grease on them. A platter of four eggs, nested on frizzled slices of baked ham, came up.

Jones stared.

The Chink went back to the kitchen and returned with a plate of biscuits that looked light enough to take off like little ballons and seemed only to be held down by the brown upper crust. With them was enough butter to please a grizzly bear.

Jones let his breath out in a long *whoosh.* "Man," he demanded, "where you get

ham? Where in hell you get butter?"

"I catch em," the Chinaman returned cheerfully. "You like?"

Jones sent him a sorrowful and admiring gaze out of eyes that seemed more square-cornered than usual. "I like," he said gravely.

The Chinaman turned to the old man. "Mistler Beaver," he said. "You talk too much. Mistler Waggle no like."

The old man cackled. "Time fer me to die anyhow."

He stared suddenly at the Chinaman. "What you tryin' to do, Sing? Doggone me, you don't heave out no ham an' butter fer strangers."

The Chinaman bobbed. "Evlybody got be careful," he said, retiring smiling into his kitchen.

The old man stared at Jones. "You a friend of his'n?"

"Never saw him before in my life."

The old man scratched his head. "Then," he said after a moment, "he sized you up."

He glared suddenly. "Who air ye?"

"Name of Jones," he said briefly.

"Hell has been fertilized for centuries by the name of Jones," the old-timer snapped.

Jones finished chewing a bite of ham and eggs, let it slide voluptuously down his throat and raised his eyebrows. Then he turned and looked at the old-timer with the beginning of a twinkle in his eye. "Glad to meet you Mr.—Beaver?"

"Beaver Sam Higgs," the old-timer snapped. "Been the same for seventy-four years. He added severely, "No change!"

There was a long silence during which the ham and eggs and the remainder of the biscuits disappeared.

Jones turned to Beaver Sam. "Feel better. You know I was kind of sore at this here town. Couldn't even git a drink in it. Come into a bar peaceful like an' couldn't even git a quiet drink."

Sing appeared. He tittered. "No can get dlink if Mistler Waggle no like now. Mistler Waggle run town now."

He put a platter deftly on the counter and an odor out of another and better life assailed Jones' nostrils. "You likee appa pie?" Sing beamed at him.

Jones looked at him and then down at the thing in front of him. It was a full-sized pie, and deep. Up through the perforated crust juice still oozed, bubbling and fragrant. The fragrance gave him the idea suddenly that maybe Heaven was not just an affair of the white race after all.

The voice of Beaver Sam interrupted what was almost a religious revery.

"What you mean, you damn Chink? What you mean, Waggoner runs this town? He don't run it yet. Ye durn no-good, snivelin' heathen!"

The Chinaman listened with an impassive face but with something like admiration in his almond eyes.

When Beaver Sam had come to a blazing-eyed and breathless finish, he said, "Yes, sir, Mistler Beaver. Mistler Waggle win tlial, he win town. Mistler Waggle win tlial because he put men outside coult-house windows. Men inside a' buzz 'lound like bee in nest. Men outside shoot like put fi'ah in bee-house. No good."

BEAVER SAM choked, near to apoplexy. Sing put a pitcher down in front of Jones. "Cleam," he said blandly. "Flesh."

Jones looked at it and then drew back as though it were a scorpion. His eyes narrowed dangerously. "All right," he said, staring into the bottomless almond gaze before him. "You got apple pie. I can smell it. But you ain't got fresh cream to go with it. I've seen the elephunt an' I've heard the owl an'—"

Sing laughed and his high Chinese voice, which had been bred on vowels that English does not have, had a run of joyousness in it. "Catch 'em cleam some days," he said. "You dlink 'em, eat 'em."

Jones ate 'em and drank 'em. He put the last fragrant morsel of pie away and swallowed the last of his fifth cup of coffee.

"Sing," he said, breathing deeply. "I'm thankin' you. How much do I owe you?"

"No pay," the Chinaman said, beaming at him. "You no get dlink in town, you no pay dinna."

Jones' face hardened. "Don't try to pull that on me, you heathen!" he rasped. "What's the bill?"

Sing bowed. "Yes, sir. Bir' fifty cent."

Jones looked at him a long time, his eyes getting bleaker. Then he reached slowly into his pocket and pulled out fifty cents. He put it on the counter in front of him and stood up. Sing reached for the fifty-cent piece and started to pick it up. Jones'

hand flickered like a candle flame in a quick breath of air.

Sing looked at the gun muzzle under his nose. Then he looked up.

Jones reached out and took up the fifty-cent piece. "You don't welsh on me," he said grimly. "When a man offers me a free feed, I hold him to it."

Sing's eyes held pure, enigmatic pleasure. "Yes, sir," he said softly.

Jones stalked out, Beaver Sam beside him.

"If you'll maybe tell me what this is all about!" the old-timer exploded.

Jones rolled his eyes at him. "I reckon," he said judicially, "you're too old to handle a shotgun."

Beaver Sam exploded.

When he had got through, Jones said, "Yeah, but it looks like you're about the only one in this town that has any innards left."

Beaver started to explode again but thought better of it. "Look, son," he choked. "You don't know this town. Why the's half a dozen gents—Carson City Charlie an' Pelty Pete Jouhard, an' Ben Salter an'—"

Jones held up his hand. "I bet there ain't six scatterguns amongst ye," he said.

Beaver started to explode again and then he looked at Jones and laughed. "The's a dozen, son," he said. "Go on, speak your piece. I ain't senile yit. . . ."

The courtroom was packed. Most of the town was there and about eight out of ten who had pushed in were regretting it now. It was plain to any man, once he had gotten into it, that the place was a potential slaughterhouse. It would be every man against his neighbor and no holds barred. Once lead began to fly in this jam-packed place it would be a holocaust. A man didn't even know who his enemy might be.

But what chilled the blood of the more decent citizens who had come, hoping against hope, to see justice done, were the faces along the windows.

This courtroom was part of the biggest building in town. It occupied half of the rear two thirds of the building. In front were offices. One half of the rear was occupied by the county files and a couple of vacant rooms which had, from time to time, extra-legal uses. The courtroom itself had three blank walls except for an entrance door in the front and a door to the clerk's room at the rear. The third side was composed mostly of windows—five of them giving out onto the dusty space between the courthouse and Paley's General Store.

These windows, too, were packed, three men to a window, peering in. Fifteen men and every man of them Waggoner's man. That tied it up tighter than a calf for the branding. Ike Waggoner was inside. So were others of his men. The judge, the jury, the crowd packed sweating along the benches were all sitting ducks.

Only One-eye Murch appeared to be unaware of it. He raised his cry lustily: "Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye . . ."

The judge took his seat and turned his white face to the colorless, sweating faces of the crowd and jury. He started to open his mouth, then gaped and closed it. A lanky figure—a complete stranger to the judge—had stood up among the spectators.

"Your Honor," the stranger said, "I got somethin' important to say."

The judge only stared.

"This whole trial," the stranger drawled, "has been rigged up."

Juicy Cayhew, Waggoner's lawyer, and the defendant's, charged to his feet bawling, "Your Honor, what is this?"

"Shut up!" The lean man's voice cut him off. Cayhew pulled his fat, flabby face around at the stranger, his eyes staring.

"Sit down," Jones said curtly.

As though hypnotized the lawyer sat.

"Ike Waggoner wanted to show that he was boss of the town," Jones drawled. "That's why he let his man be arrested. He wanted to show that—sit down, Waggoner, or drag 'em! You got your choice!"

THE fat man stared at him. Then his gaze shifted to the windows and shock showed in his eyes. The windows were empty.

His throat worked. "All right, Mr. Jones," he drawled. "We don't know what your game is—but we'll find out."

He sat down. It was, Jones recognized, a nice recovery.

"If Waggoner could pull this trial off and get his man cleared, because the judge was a white-livered rabbit and nobody here had the guts to start a mass slaughter, then

he would be top dog in a hurry and permanent. From then on, every time he pulled somethin', folks would keep their traps closed. Nobody would bother to arrest a Waggoner man because it would be useless an' unhealthy. He'd be acquitted, and the damned fool gent who arrested him would be in for trouble."

He paused to let his words sink in and his eyes roved the courtroom again. He saw that Ike Waggoner was sitting with his back squarely to him.

He saw Ape Carney sitting on a front seat across the room from his boss and he caught a glimpse of the bartender's face turned toward him, baffled. A faint, warning bell struck in his mind. What was it about bartenders?

His mild, square-cornered eyes found themselves looking into a pair of blazing, incredulous blue ones. He crinkled the corners of his eyes at the girl and saw next to her the man who had been talking with her that afternoon. John Curly's square young face was not quite readable.

"If this thing breaks," Jones said to him, "I'll be countin' on you."

John Curly jumped up from his seat. "Count then," he said. "You won't be wrong!"

A head in the crowd snapped toward him. A lean, lizard-like head, with lips like a gash in wood and a hooked nose and gimlet eyes. Jones could guess that the face was usually expressionless and that the startled expression was now one of intense surprise. He knew also that he had found the final man of the Waggoner gang—the man he had been looking for—Zeke, the banker.

Ace Carney's sixgun blasted. The bullet took Jones along the cheekbone and nicked his ear going by. He hardly noticed it. The bartender had pulled a shotgun from under the bench and swung it toward Jones. Jones' bullet took him in the throat.

A slug of Waggoner's hit Jones' ribs. Jones shot Waggoner in the stomach and again in the chest.

He wondered why Carney had not killed him but when he looked Carney wasn't there and there was a smoking sixgun in John Curly's hand.

An old, quavering voice from the window sounded. "Keep up the shootin'. I ain't rightly had no use for this scattergun yit."

It was Beaver Sam. Beside him appeared another man, and then two more windows filled up.

"We didn't have no trouble with 'em, pardner," Beaver Sam said to Jones. "When they found six scatterguns in their backs they come peaceable, but it tooken some time to tie 'em up. I'm shore sorry to be a little late."

Jones looked at the judge who had emerged from his pulpit. "I reckon you can go on with your trial."

The foreman of the jury, a short, squat man, stood up. "I ain't sayin' how the trial would have gone," he said, "but I know how it'll go now."

The lean man's face looked suddenly scared. He broke toward the windows. A small, hurtling form reached him, flung herself into his arms, kissed him.

"Stay!" Carla gasped at him. "Don't go. We—all of us—need you."

Jones put the girl gently aside. "Friend," he said to Curly, "I'm owin' you. You're the only one that stood up on his hind legs like a man. An' if it hadn't been for you, Ace Carney would have got me. I'm thankin' you." His face got suddenly savage. "Where's that banker? That Zeke?"

The crowd slowed up, looking over its shoulder. John Curly looked suddenly bewildered and also looked over his shoulder.

A big man with a star on his chest said grimly, "Sorry, he ain't here no more. He was fingerin' a hideout gun when a stray bullet got him. I reckon the mortgages is in other hands now."

Jones grinned and slid a long leg over the window sill. "So long, folks," he said, and was gone.

He got to his horse before half the crowd had managed to fight its way out of the courthouse. In front of his restaurant Sing was standing.

The long lines of Jones' face relaxed at the sight. "So long, Sing," he said.

The Chinaman beamed. "So 'ong, Mistler Jones," he bobbed. "You came back soon, huh? I cook 'em shalk fin soupee."

Jones' grin widened. "I bet it would shore be good, Sing. But them sharks didn't have no fins."

He touched spurs to his horse and rode down the street toward the setting sun.

★ COLONEL FURLONG'S

Thrilling Novel of Bayou Fighters

By

FRANK BONHAM

Maroon looked at the cowman who stood there with the mallet gripped tightly in his hand.

DAMNATION RAILROAD

CHAPTER ONE

Railroad Fever

ALL that day Colonel Cabe Furlong had ridden through steaming forests of sweet gum and cypress, slapping at mosquitoes and wondering why people would live on the eastern end of the Red River when there was a western end. The streams he forded were fat with moss; the fish were too tired to jump. Fragrance dripped from the magnolias, sweet, oversweet, like a saloon girl's scent.

The air was thick and warm as a liqueur.

"Colonel" Furlong figured that a Texan needed to be made a jackass of only once. After that, the biggest of damned fools should be able to take care of himself, even in the Devil's playground along the Red River. So the colonel sent out a call for men to build a railroad, men who had already consigned Furlong to a muddy grave—with thirty tons of fire, brimstone and damnation for his headstone!

The colonel liked the kind of air they had around Wichita Falls, air you could breathe gustily, without fear of a hangover.

Furlong was a big, loosely-built man. Behind the cantle of his roping saddle was rolled his frock coat. His galluses were bright red stripes against the sweat-soaked shirt. He was large in the Texas tradition, not gracefully made but with the stout, pegged strength of frontier furniture. Lately he had had to wear round silver spectacles. He was a little ashamed of the glasses, but made a joke out of it.

"I don't rightly have to wear the damned things. Only when I want to see."

Around sundown he entered the outskirts of Jefferson. Almost the first thing he discovered was a railroad, raised on a black mole of earth. Here he halted his horse to gaze down the shining strips of steel. There was a sign which said:

LOOK OUT FOR TRAINS
D. & B. R. RAIL ROAD CO.

Dallas and Baton Rouge. The colonel remembered a road called the Dallas and Missouri. Wichita Falls had gone all out for it, subscribing bonds and giving enchilada suppers and every other damn thing to raise money to help out the road. Colonel Furlong had personally bought bonds to the extent of fifty thousand dollars. But the railroad company lost interest and never got around to finishing it.

Furlong rode into town. Solid-looking structures of brick enclosed a tree-choked town square and ambled down an easy slope to the bayou. On the water, lights of steamboats slithered through the darkness. Ashore, steam winches puffed and drays cannonaded over wooden wharves.

The colonel, attracted by the white-blazing gas lights of a hotel, took a room here. It was called the Caddo House. As he was fixing his signature to the register, he murmured, "So Jefferson's got a railroad, now."

The clerk was a sharp-nosed young man with a starched collar tall enough to cut his throat. "Yes, *sir!* They've built from Dallas through Jefferson and ten miles east. Watch this town boom when they reach Baton Rouge!"

"Or listen to her thud, if they don't."

The clerk retained his smile. In a boom town, pessimism was considered obscene.

"By the way . . . I have an old friend in railroading, Thomas Burgess. By any chance is he connected with the D. & B. R.?"

"Tex Burgess? Why, he owns it! Mr. Burgess stays with us when he's in town."

After dinner, the colonel found a print-shop in which, by fizzing gaslight, a printer wearing a green eyeshade was setting type.

"Like a poster made up," Furlong said. "Here's what I want it to say."

The printer muttered the words to himself. "'Hiring Office, Texas & Pacific Rail Road. Highest Wages Offered.' All right. How big a poster?"

The colonel estimated by extending both arms. "Make it red ink, if you got it. I'll pick it up in the morning."

The printer started as the big man went out. "Hey, mister—Now, that's queer," he grunted. "It says, "Texas and Pacific.' Wonder if he knows ours is the Dallas and Baton Rouge?"

COLONEL FURLONG'S observation was that in towns where sweat flowed most freely the liquor flowed in equal quantities. In Jefferson he counted fifteen bars on the main street, between its foot on the bayou, and the top of the hill.

At the bottom were the dives where men drank as if they needed it. Furlong stood at the end of an unwashed bar in the Magnolia Saloon and watched railroad and dock-workers forget about the heat and mosquitoes. A lot of them had the yellow complexion that was malaria's calling card. They scratched themselves where chiggers, mosquitoes and ticks had gouged.

He had two drinks at a solitary table. The atmosphere of the Magnolia seemed to close in on him, soggy as a wet cigar. Out on a patch of floor, a dozen men were trying to dance, and making as hard work of it as they did their trade of bucking ties and swinging sledges. The girls wore short skirts and tight bodices and displayed wilted flowers in their hair.

If you closed your eyes, the colonel thought, you could almost feel the pressure of the noise against your eyeballs. It would take something pretty dramatic to buy a man the chance to talk. He pulled out his .44 caliber Army Colt. His thumb

rubbed a copper cap on the fluted cylinder; he pulled the hammer back a couple of times, making the cylinder revolve.

He pulled a bead on a fish-tail burner in the ceiling. The shot was a jolting concussion that blinked every gas-light in the room. The burner he had shot at went out, while pieces of the shattered tip went all over the saloon.

Silence rolled in after the thunder of the shot, and then there was a scurrying as if all the rats in town were suddenly debarking. Men nearest the door got out. Most of the remainder hit the sawdust.

The colonel touched the now-warm barrel against his upper lip, a habit he had, and slipped the Colt back into its holster. He had the attention of at least half the patrons. He stood on his chair, feeling foolish and determined.

"Boys," he said, "I'm sorry for the ruckus. But I've got something to say!"

They came out from behind the bar, from under tables, rose slowly from the floor. Furlong removed his round silver spectacles and began to polish a lens with the tag end of his black string tie.

"That shot," he stated, "didn't jolt you half as much as this is goin' to: I'm hirin' for the Texas & Pacific Railroad, and I'm offerin' you just fifty per cent more than you're making here. How does that sound?"

They dealt him the looks a crowd always gives a man until he has won its confidence. Some of them moved nearer and one, a thick-set, brown-haired man with a look of easy confidence, asked, "How do you know how much we're making, friend?"

"I don't. I just say, whatever you're making, I'll pay fifty per cent more. Reckon you draw about thirty a month and found. The Texas & Pacific will put forty-five in your jeans."

He had them, then. He saw a lot of them looking at one another; yet a certain restraint held them. Colonel Furlong, drawing a paper from his pocket, read aloud.

" 'Transportation guaranteed to end-of-track. Good food, payday once a month, tools furnished.' If I was a working man, boys," he said, "I'd say, 'When do I start?'" He spread his hands. "Well, what do you say?"

The stocky man stood with his head back and his fists on his hips. Short and heavy, his features broad and the curly brown hair growing down his neck to his collar, he called to the colonel's mind a badger in wilted white duck. He looked angry, aggressive and tough.

"I say you're a phony," he declared. "I say you'd better shut your mouth and get out of here. My name's Joe Maroon, by the way. I'm assistant superintendent of the D. & B. R."

CHAPTER TWO

Shotgun Welcome

THE colonel descended from the chair. He replaced his spectacles, regarded Maroon an instant, then produced a letter on T. & P. stationery which he put into the railroad man's hands. It was a contract with the Texas and Pacific by which the company was to take all the workers he sent them for a period of six months.

While Maroon frowned at it, he spoke past him to the men. "I'm no trouble-maker, boys," he said. "I just like to see a man get a square deal. I don't figure you're getting one. This is bad country you're working in. The pay ought to be higher. 'Way we figure, your road's building deeper into snake country every day, while ours is a-headin' for the plains. West to California for forty-five a month; east to Baton Rouge for thirty . . ."

Maroon shoved the paper back at him. "How long you going to be here?"

"How long do you want me to be here?"

"Till I get back. Twenty minutes."

"I'll be here," the colonel agreed. "I'll just talk to 'em about the beauties of California."

When Joe Maroon returned, he was accompanied by two men. One was in his middle years, a stout man with a cascade of chins. He wore a gray suit and a black tie with a crooked knot. He wore also a marshal's shield.

The second was a young blond lath of a man who needed flesh, and yet had a tempered, brown-skinned ruggedness. He seemed to be all points: his Adam's apple protruded, the mucles of his jaws stuck out like marbles, his brows were sharp ledges. The colonel took a good look at him. He was a railroad man; he was here

to try to throw him out; still, there was the look of a dreamer in the wide-spaced brown eyes, and the colonel had respect for dreamers.

"Tom, this is him," Maroon said. "He says his name's Furlong. Furlong, this is Superintendent Wingate."

Wingate glanced at the crowd. He frowned, not liking what he found. "What's this cock-and-bull story about forty-five dollars a month for railroad workers?"

"Cock an' bull? I'm layin' it on the line, Mr. Wingate."

Wingate snorted. "No railroad can pay that and stay solvent. You're a fraud, Furlong. Better switch over to a shell game. But leave my men alone."

Colonel Furlong glanced back at the railroad men. "They're a pretty handy-lookin' crowd, Wingate. I'd say they weren't anybody's men."

On the floor, there was a faint shifting of feet. Joe Maroon snapped, "Let's talk about this outside."

The street air seemed relatively healthful, after the miasma of the saloon. Maroon's hand jerked out of his pocket with a wad of bills. He unfolded two twenties and shoved them at the colonel.

"Take this and buy yourself a drunk. But wake up in some other town, mister, because we don't shake down twice."

The colonel's eyes came up to Maroon's congested face. "I'm right on the point of gettin' mad," he said.

Maroon cursed and pocketed the money. "Then what in hell—"

Wingate laid a hand on his arm. "Colonel," he said, "maybe you do represent the Texas & Pacific. But we sure as tarnation aren't going to have you representing the T. & P. here, because we're short of workers already! Assuming you've been to a little expense getting set up here, how much do you figure it would be worth to you to move on?"

Furlong chuckled. "Maroon just said that," he declared.

Up to this point, the marshal had been silent, standing there with his hands clutching his lapels and his fat face stern. His black brows were thick as a man's thumb; pulled in that way, they were impressive. His voice was as deep as a bull 'gator's.

"There ain't any ordinance against soliciting workers in public places," he remarked. "But by tomorrow noon there's goin' to be. I'm honin' nobody's axe, Furlong. I'm thinking of the town. I came here when we had to look under the sheets for flannel-mouths before we crawled in. I've seen that first freight line expand to ten; I've seen the stages come and the steamboats follow them. Jefferson's the doorway to the South, and it's going to stay that way."

He looked the colonel over, his mouth as hard as sun-cured rawhide. "We've been losing trade lately because a couple of two-bit towns have got railroads to the East and we haven't. Looks now like we'd have one pretty soon, if somebody don't get to rocking the boat. You ain't aiming to do it, are you?"

Colonel Furlong reflected. He shook his head slowly. "Mr. Drake, up at Texarkana, says we need men. I'm just going to have to take them where I find them."

Joe Maroon's temper had been searching the seams like an over-heated boiler, and now it burst loose. "Just one thing this slob understands, and we might as well get to it!"

HE SAID that and leaned into the colonel to fire a blow with his powerful, short right arm at the colonel's chin. Furlong turned his head and the blow snapped past. He caught Maroon's thick arm and twisted it up behind him. With his open hand, he slapped Maroon back and forth across the face. Maroon slugged at him with his free hand. Furlong banged him on the nose with his fist. Then he took him by the throat and shook him like a terrier, and flung him to the sidewalk.

"Damned railroad scum!" he said. The colonel was white and his voice shook a little.

Marshal Bastions had pulled his revolver. The cattleman, his head tucked down and his eyes squinting above the rims of his glasses, watched him. The glance of Tom Wingate held the colonel closely. He said, "You don't talk like a railroad man, Colonel. I don't think you're even working for Texas & Pacific. All I think is that this has gone far enough for tonight. Tomorrow . . . Well, you've got all night to think."

The colonel did some thinking that night.

Over a bottle of good whiskey he tucked in some tag ends of his plans and thought about Tex Burgess, president of the D. & B. R.

Burgess had come to Wichita Falls a couple of years ago with a roll of profile maps under his arm and a big handshake for everybody. Within a week, every man in the cattle town was calling him Tex and trving to buy him a drink.

Then he unrolled his maps and started talking; he waved his hand and they saw buildings arise from the prairie, heard the distant *toot* of cattle trains and felt the slick skin of gold-pieces in their fingers. The magic wand of railroading was about to be waved over Wichita. Herds of cattle would choke the pens, buyers and cowmen would sit on the corral bars and dicker, and all those thousands of cattle would be loaded into the cars and rumble northward.

Wichita Falls was to be king of the cow towns.

Then Burgess started talking about the stock he was selling. The certificates were beautiful and they cost only fifty dollars apiece. Colonel Furlong had taken a thousand of them. He had been a big man. He wasn't so big, now. In fact, he had only three shirts in his grip and he had had to give up the flowered vests he liked because he could no longer afford such expensive things.

The Dallas and Missouri had bogged down forty-five miles southwest of Kansas City. Burgess never returned to Wichita Falls, but he sent a letter offering to redeem the certificates at a dollar seventy-five apiece. A number of citizens sold. Colonel Furlong held onto his.

He had a conviction that a Texan needed to be made a jackass of only once. After that, he could take care of himself. The colonel's deal with the Texas & Pacific was valid. Sure, the workboss in Texarkana told him; he could use all the workmen Furlong sent him, even at a good price. He'd pay five per cent commission on the first month's wages. Of course, he might have to drop the men back to their former wages after they'd built their way out of reach of Tex Burgess' road; but would they be any worse off than they had been with Burgess?

The colonel thought not.

CHAPTER THREE

Strong-Arm Delegation

JUST off the lobby was the dining room of the Caddo House. Here, next morning, the colonel was partaking of an ample breakfast when a young woman stopped beside his table. She was attractive, with the creamy dark complexion of the south, with rich lips and dark-blue eyes. There was nothing wrong with her figure that the colonel could find.

"Colonel Furlong? The man at the desk pointed you out to me. I'm Laura Nash." She offered her hand.

Furlong had never heard of her, but he took her hand and squeezed it too little in his fear of squeezing too much. "Pleased to know you," he said. "Will you sit down?"

She let him order coffee for her, but afterwards a big rift threatened in the conversation. She sugared the coffee and tasted it; then her eyes came up quickly to his face.

"You're wondering who I am. The Shreveport and Texas Navigation company is mine—the Orange Flag line. A friend of mine heard you talk at the Magnolia Bar last night."

The colonel sank back in his chair more comfortably. So it was going to be business, not just a social encounter. He wasn't used to women in business, but Laura Nash gave the impression that she could add a line of figures and perhaps even bargain a little. The dark eyes were quick. She had a direct way of speaking.

"Well, yes," he said, "I did give a little talk. Was it a job bucking ties or setting rails that you wanted?"

She laughed. "I wasn't thinking of working for the railroad," she told him. It seemed that she accented the word "for" just a bit. "Have you been with the T. & P. long?"

"Not very."

Laura Nash glanced about the room with a woman's interest in everyone in sight. Someone near a window opening on the warm, sunshot street held her attention. Then: "Mr. Wingate doesn't like your being in town, I understand."

"Don't seem to. Quick-tempered young fellow."

"Mr. Wingate doesn't like our being here together, either. That's he by the window. I'm afraid he saw me come in. He stays here too, you know."

The colonel removed his spectacles, which were no good for distance, and discerned Tom Wingate, the railroad superintendent, at a table by the window. Blond, lanky and angular, Wingate sat there with his elbows on the table and his hungry-looking eyes on the colonel and the girl.

He arose, placed some money by his plate, and came across the dining room. He paused by the table, giving the colonel a short, disdainful look, and faced Laura Nash angrily. "For a while," he said, "I didn't connect you up with this. Clever; very clever!"

"I don't understand you at all," the girl said, her eyes laughing at him.

Wingate snorted. "Oh, no! You only brought this man here to make trouble. But you don't understand what I mean."

Laura retained the smile which seemed to make Wingate so furious. "Always the gentleman, Mr. Wingate."

Wingate's crane-like body made a half-bow. "Always the schemer, madam. But this time it won't work. That's a promise. Furlong," he said, "watch yourself." He turned and walked stiffly out of the dining room.

"What'd he mean?" the colonel frowned. "You want me to bring him back and make him apologize?" He hoped she didn't, but it seemed proper.

"Mr. Wingate is very emotional about his railroad. We aren't exactly on the same side of the fence, you know, and I suppose he thinks I put you up to this. Who *did* put you up to it, Colonel?"

"I did. You've got to do something to make a living."

"And you decided that wrecking railroads was as good a way as any."

"You're as bad as Wingate. I tell you, all I want is track workers. Where they come from ain't my business."

Laura Nash tapped her teeth with a well-shaped nail. "I was hoping you did have something against the road, because I might be able to help you."

The colonel glanced at her quickly. "Well, now, I don't say that I'd go out of my way to avoid putting Burgess to a little trouble. What's on your mind?"

When he looked deeply ino her eyes, he discerned something hard and undeceived. *You've got everything now, but you've took a couple of jolts getting it,* the colonel thought. Young women of twenty-five or six were by nature optimistic. Laura Nash could not mask a cynicism and a bitterness in her mind.

"We could really talk better on the street, couldn't we?" she remarked.

THE colonel paid the check and they walked through the dappled sun-and-shade of the square. The girl carried a blue silk parasol to cut the sun's sharpness. She was an expensively-turned-out, graceful creature to walk beside, and the cattleman felt like an uncombed mountain goat. She began to speak so quietly he had to walk close to hear.

"Everybody knows Burgess is having trouble holding onto his men," she told him. "The swamps aren't nice country to build railroads in. There is some talk that he's been importing men from Vicksburg, and Vicksburg is in the middle of a yellow fever epidemic. They'd lynch him if they could prove it. Naturally," she said, "I'd be glad if he had to quit. I make my living hauling freight by steamboat."

"I don't think you've told me just how you intend to help."

Laura spoke softly. "Well, there's the rail shortage. They have to come up the river. A few loads sunk or lost would stop him temporarily. Ties are hard to come by, too. I daresay they could be lost in the woods, don't you?"

The colonel was shocked. What she was talking about was sabotage. He said, "Those things aren't just agoin' to happen, ma'am. They've got to be . . . seen to."

"Of course. Burgess bought his own boats to haul his supplies, just to beat us out of any possible profit. Naturally, any boat is liable to hit a submerged tree. We could work together to see that such things did happen."

They paused under a vast sweet-gum and the colonel pushed some leaves around with the toe of his boot. It was hard for him to look at her. It was somehow as though he had accidentally observed her undressing. She had shown him a side of her nature no lady should have possessed, and damn' few men.

He asked, "What have you got against railroads, Miss Nash?"

"Mrs. Nash," she corrected. "Widow Nash—that's what I've got against them, Colonel. My husband was a boat man. We worked the small streams because we had small boats. We had a fight with a railroad in Tennessee. They kept building bridges across our streams so that we were blocked from our markets, and we kept tearing them down.

"He was shot from the bank, one night. That was two years ago. It's funny, but when I hear a train whistle, I want to fight."

She brought the ribs of her parasol against the rod with a snap. "Do you like my proposition, or don't you?"

"I wish I could say I did. Lord knows I'm goin' to need help. But there's ethics, even in war."

Laura Nash's regard was contemptuous. "When you fail at this," she remarked, "I suggest you try the clergy. You seem to be all weighted down with morals."

He watched her walk away, in and out of the shadows on the red dirt walk. Furlong felt as though he had been handling a delicate and expensive pocket pistol, one of those custom-made dandies' guns, precise but treacherous, apt to go off in your pocket or your face. He was glad to put it down.

* * *

There was the matter of an office.

Furlong discovered a dusty hole-in-the-wall on a side street. He set his poster in the window, bought new pens and some ink, and prepared to wait. In about an hour, a big, tow-headed Swede stopped to frown at the poster. Then he looked up and the colonel, catching his eyes, smiled and nodded.

The Swede entered. "You the fella that was talking in the Magnolia last night?"

"Right. And what I said is straight as a string. Sign the book and pack. Count on two days around town till I get up the rest of the gang you'll go out with."

The Swede chewed his ropy mustache, scowled at the floor and finally signed.

"Send your friends along," the colonel suggested.

In a few minutes, a dozen of his companions showed up. Enthusiasm came through their skepticism like light through a chinked wall. "Sick of them snakes and chiggers," one of them declared. "Sure this road of yours is headin' West?"

"Stick with us and you'll land in San Diego!"

"Burgess ain't going to like this," one of the others ventured.

The first man dipped the pen. "The hell with Burgess!"

After that, there weren't enough pens to go around. By one-thirty, forty-five men had signed up. Still an uneasiness dogged the colonel. He recalled Marshal Bastions' declaration: "There ain't no ordinance against soliciting workers, but there's going to be!" He was just a little worried about this.

For a few minutes trade slackened; during this interval a slim man entered. He wore his hat on the side of his head, his grin on the side of his mouth, and a cigar over his ear.

Colonel Furlong's manner sharpened. "Maroon send you?"

The slim man, who wasn't so slim in the shoulders when you took a good look, removed the cigar from its perch and moistened it all over with saliva. He did not answer until he had lighted it.

"Nobody sends me any place," he said pleasantly. "How's business?"

"Good."

"I've been hearing about you, Colonel. Thought I'd look in."

"Fine. Can't offer you a thing to drink but ink; but make yourself at home." The colonel's air remained guarded as the man moved around the office, glanced with interest at the ledger, and began to hum under his breath.

Across the street, a man stopped to gaze into the window of a harness store.

"Workin' on commission, Colonel?" the stranger asked.

Furlong placed his large hard hands flat on the table and stared up at the freighter. "If you had anything on your mind—"

He saw a second man stop beside the other looking into the harness store. They turned and regarded the Texas & Pacific employment office candidly.

The visitor drew strongly on the cigar. There were knots of cartilage under his scarred brows. "I shore did have something on my mind, Colonel. They're going

to put the big britches on you if you keep on with this. They won't fit comfortable, neither. I'd recommend you getting into another line of work right soon."

Furlong was looking past him. Joe Maroon and another man had stopped before the office, and now the pair across the street was walking towards it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Don't Hurry Back

THE colonel rose. "If you're with Maroon," he said, "I'm going to make you wish you weren't. If you aren't, you'd better get out the back way."

Joe Maroon came into the office, his three companions following him. The assistant superintendent of the D. & B. R. wore soiled duck trousers and had cuffed his shirt-sleeves halfway to the elbows. He slapped upon the desk a thin sheaf of yellowbacks.

"Take it or leave it!"

The men behind him had been selected for the job. All of them were rugged-appearing, with the build of veteran railroaders.

It was squarely up to the colonel. He couldn't take the offer, and he realized what it would mean to leave it. He examined the bills, counted them, and then abruptly tore them across the middle and tossed them at Joe Maroon.

Maroon pulled a brown leather blackjack from his hip pocket and started around the desk. At this moment Colonel Furlong placed his fingertips under the edge of the desk and overturned it in the other man's lap. Maroon went down, struggling, one of his men going with him. The other two circled the desk to take the Texan from both sides. At this same instant, the cigar-chewing man who had come in first jumped on the colonel's back. Furlong reached up and got the man's throat in his large hands; he began to squeeze, and the other made choking noises and released his hold. Furlong flung him half way across the room.

Furlong swung at Maroon's head. The blow almost tore the man's ear off. It began to bleed as Maroon gasped, white with pain. One of the others darted in and hung onto the colonel's left arm. The colonel swung about and began to pound at this man's face, but Maroon came back to slash at his head. This time Furlong's guard went up an instant too late. He felt the pain of the blow as a violent roaring in his ears.

When his head cleared, leaving the pain as a raw edge behind his eyeballs, his other arm was pinioned. Maroon had slipped the blackjack in his pocket and was starting a blow at the colonel's jaw, as if only the meeting of knuckles with flesh could give him the sensual gratification he craved.

It was quick and painless. The colonel never remembered falling. . . .

When Colonel Furlong awoke, he was alone in the darkening office, alone with a vast pain and a taste in his mouth as of having taken pot-luck with coyotes. He was sick at his stomach and his head rocked.

Somehow he got back to the hotel. A bath, a few slugs of whiskey, and some rest began to ease his misery. What he thought about chiefly was that he had been a simpleton to turn down Laura Nash. Knowing Burgess as well as he did, he had thought he could fight him with wits!

He was still lying on the bed, bootless and in trousers and undershirt, when someone knocked at the door. Furlong padded to the door.

Wingate was there with a heavy-set man of middle age, a pompous-looking man whose teeth punished a cigar. Furlong experienced a rush of heat to his head. Once he had strapped on his Colt and sworn to ride all the way to Kansas City to kill this man. All he really cared about now was to break him. But he cared very much about that.

Wingate, looking very ill-at-ease, made a gesture toward Tex Burgess. "Colonel, I don't think you know—"

"The hell I don't! Come in, boys. Wingate, holler down the hall for some whiskey."

Wingate went back to order the liquor, and Burgess entered the room. He and the colonel stood and looked at each other. Tex Burgess had changed. In the old days, what you had had to notice was his bounce, the heartiness he traded on. It was all gone, now. He looked sour and driven.

Furlong sat down and began to pull on his boots. He glanced up at the railroad man with a grin. "Been growin' old, ain't

you, Burgess? If you'd come into Wichita Falls looking the way you do now, I'd have offered you four-bits, instead of fifty thousand dollars."

Burgess' fists clenched. "Furlong, what the hell are you up to?"

"Haven't you guessed yet?"

Burgess moved to the window and stood shifting the cigar about in his teeth with his fat back to the Texan. "I did the best I could by our stockholders, Furlong," he growled. "It was a matter of the market dying before we could build the road. Cattle tumbled and it didn't look like the freight would be worth hauling."

"What happened to the money?"

Tex Burgess lifted his hands and let them fall. "Takes money to fail, even. Creditors snapped at my heels till I went bankrupt."

"How much have you got buried in that can in the back yard?"

At that moment Tom Wingate came in, followed by a colored boy carrying a tray. Ice, from Jefferson's touted ice-plant, tinkled in the glasses. Furlong poured the liquor. Tom Wingate drank and then came out with something that had apparently been on his mind.

"Colonel, I'm dockin' Maroon a week's salary for that ruckus this morning. I told him I was going to handle it. All I wanted was to serve the injunction and turn the whole thing over to the marshal. Then, if you got yourself hurt, it would have been your own fault."

"Thoughtful feller," the colonel said.

Wingate frowned at him. "Just one thing I'm wondering: How did you happen to tie up with Laura Nash? I thought everybody knew how she does business. She'd steal her grandfather's glass eyeball if she could hock it for a dime."

"Did I say I was tied up with her?"

Burgess had turned a suspicious eye upon the colonel. But Tom Wingate went on, "You two looked mighty chummy this morning, not to be in it together."

Both men stared at him. Furlong sniffed his whiskey. "I always did fancy women o' her build, that's all. She's good company. Don't you think so, Wingate?"

Wingate's brown face deepened, but Burgess grunted, "She's no better than the chippies along Canal Street, not one damn' bit! She'll rob you damn quick!"

Wingate's face stiffened. "I think that's a little strong, Mr. Burgess. I wouldn't talk about Mrs. Nash in the same breath with—"

He hesitated, and Tex Burgess stared at him in disgust. "Great God! I'm trying to build a railroad, and my own superintendent falls in love with a steamboat operator!"

Wingate, angry and confused, gestured with his glass. "I'm only saying that any decent woman—"

AT THE door, standing ajar, there was a light rap. Through the opening the colonel saw a woman's skirts; he heard her clear her throat. Burgess and Wingate glanced at each other. Color darkened the engineer's face. Everyone knew it was Laura Nash. What they were wondering was how much she had heard.

The colonel opened the door for her. She glanced brightly about the room. "Such a fortunate meeting, gentlemen! I was looking for you, Mr. Burgess, and they told me you were with the colonel. I do hope I'm not—"

"Not at all!" Burgess, relieved that his remark had not been heard, bent over backward to be chivalrous. He bounded from his chair to offer it to her.

Wingate stood there awkwardly. It came to the colonel that both these men were in awe of her, but for different reasons. Wingate's eyes, when he looked at her, were like a hungry dog's. Laura had a pleasant look for the colonel. "I didn't know you and Mr. Burgess were on drinking terms. I really do think I'd better leave."

Burgess' frown agreed. But Colonel Furlong rather liked the turn the meeting had taken. "There won't be any bad words used, ma'am. Not by me, anyway."

Wingate grinned wryly. "Nor by us. After all, Colonel, we've got you stopped cold. Bastions will jug you if you solicit another worker in Jefferson."

This was true. It was also true that Laura Nash was flashing the cowman a look sharp with meaning. Furlong jumped at it. "Your trey beats my deuce. We've still got the big cards to play. I'm going to tell you why I came here, Burgess. I've got something to sell. A thousand shares of stock, at par."

The colonel walked to the mahogany

bureau. He turned with a Colt in his hand.

"Once," Furlong said, "I started to K.C. with this in my bag, looking for you. I changed my mind before I got there. I could change it back again if things didn't go to suit me. Fifty thousand dollars," he said.

The railroad man made an explosive sound in his throat. "Then you'll get nothing at all. All I can tell you is that if you tamper with my road or my men, you'll be asking for war—and you'll get it."

At this moment Laura Nash spoke. "That's exactly the sort of thing we mustn't have. In fact, that's why I came to see you, Mr. Burgess. After what happened this afternoon, I became worried. I don't say we can be friends, but we can confine our fighting to battles of wits. Would you be willing to sign a non-aggression pact with me?"

From her bag, she extracted a paper. Burgess read it and looked up frowningly.

"You want me to agree not to trespass on your property, if you'll make the same promise to me, is that it? Why?"

"Because I don't want your crowd tampering with my boats or warehouses, if it comes to bad feeling. And I don't think you would want any of your track torn up nor your rail-boats foundered. Why not have your lawyer look it over? If you like it, sign my copy tomorrow and send it down to the *Georgiana*."

"Sounds like good business," Tom Wingate said.

Burgess grunted and tucked the papers in his coat.

When the men had left, Laura Nash stood up. "So they've stopped you cold, in Jefferson."

"Looks that way."

"Have they got you stopped on the rivers?"

"I don't own any boats."

"No, but you could charter one from me. You could fit the *Georgiana* out with posters, free beer and a band. The railroad's building within a mile of the river down near Salt Creek. If you ever got a few of those boys down on a hot night, they'd knock you down getting the pen out of your hand."

The colonel digested it. "By God! That's out of the city limits!"

"About ten miles." Laura slipped the strap of her handbag over her forearm. "You wouldn't have to pay in cash. Just give me a commission on the men we haul to Texarkana."

Furlong took her hand in his big, warm paw and this time he wasn't afraid to squeeze it. "Mrs. Nash," he said, "you were right all along. You can't fight men like these by curtseyin'. . . . I'll order the beer in the morning."

She laughed and went to the door. "Can you keep a secret? I took a lease on some state land along Salt Creek last month. It's a strip of swamp thirty miles long, and I got it for next to nothing. When you get your posters made, will you have them make up some 'No Trespassing' signs, too? I might as well let Burgess know his railroad is stopping at Salt Creek as soon as he gets there!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Envoy to Hell

AT SUNUP two days later, the *Georgiana* started down Big Cypress Bayou with a five-piece brass band and a substantial cargo of beer. Furlong had made no effort to keep it secret that he was still in business. A crowd had come down to the waterfront to watch the boat get under way.

That night they tied up to the bank a few rods above Salt Creek. The engines shut down; they could hear the humming night sounds and, from far off, the puff-and-clank of a steam engine. Then that noise died and Furlong envisioned the railroad camp back in the woods quieting down, the men trudging to the mess cars.

Furlong ordered the band out. In Jefferson, they had collected three men who played brass, a man who beat the drum for the town band, and a picolo player. The cacophony these instruments generated in the quiet bayou-land was a shattering thing. A mile away, bull'gators stopped roaring to listen.

Around eight o'clock, a lantern bobbled into view. Seven or eight men stopped at the foot of the landing stage. The colonel let the band rest. He went to the guard and held his beer-schooner aloft.

"All aboard, boys! Just tappin' a new

keg of beer. The heat's awful, ain't it?"

"Shore is," somebody said. They came up the stage, rough-looking men in clothes heavy with the sweat and dirt of their labors. Furlong was already drawing their beer. Overworked and underfed, they put it down in noisy gulps.

By this time other men were dragging themselves through the swamp growth to the banks. The beer drew them like catfish to a mess of innards. The deck began to be covered with men. Some held a schooner of beer in each hand. As the colonel passed through with a pen, a bottle of ink, and his ledger, he found none who were not willing to set a schooner down long enough to sign.

"Any of you boys don't want to go back to the job tonight," he told them, "we've got the bunks made and the sheets turned down."

They booked thirty-six men that night, of whom all but a half-dozen stayed.

The following night, these six returned with forty-three in tow. The *Georgiana* was getting crowded. The colonel told Laura they ought to be starting for Texarkana pretty soon.

"No," she told him. "They must be getting close to Salt Creek. We've got to be around when Burgess rides up and starts to show them where he wants his first pile driven! We're going up tomorrow to post our sign."

The colonel asked one of the converts where end-of-track was. "Ain't but half a mile short o' the creek," the workman told him.

"How's the health of the men?"

The man shrugged. "Not much worse ner usual. Reckon Burgess does his best. Ever a man gits plumb sick, he carts him off to Slabtown to the hospital."

Laura said nothing until the man had gone. Then she told Furlong gravely, "Slabtown has no hospital, Colonel."

For the first time, then, the Texan knew what kind of man he had gone to war with. He knew that if Burgess saw an opportunity, he would give him a bed in the same hospital, where Death was the doctor, a lost slough somewhere in the swamp. It came to him that he had been a fool to let Laura get into this.

"We'll start for Texarkana in the morning," he told her. "It don't matter about the creek. I'll handle that when we get back. But you ain't going to be aboard. And if you've got the savvy to come in out of the rain, you'll put this boat back on its regular run and tell me to find another."

She stood at the rail, looking down into the warm water of the bayou. "Didn't I make it clear to you that I've been in this kind of a fight before? I knew what I was getting into. For a change, I'd like to see a railroad lose a fight."

THROUGH the hot haze of the next morning, they nosed into the crowded channel of Salt Creek. It was a narrow branch choked with vegetation. Now and then the stern-wheeler would ring down while a stump was hogged out of the way. At last the pilot shook his head.

"She ain't liking it, Captain. Too shoal."

Captain Rice said, "Furlong, this is your baby. You want to take the signs up in a dinghy? I'll give you a boy to row you."

Furlong felt no urge for the job, but he took the wooden signs under his arm and went down to the bow. It was about four o'clock, the evening haze coming up from the swamps but the heat as oppressive as ever. He was standing there watching the rosters launch the boat when Laura hurried up. "You weren't trying to get away without me, were you?"

The colonel held her firmly by the arm. "Young woman, one place you aren't going is in that dinghy."

She kept her attitude of amusement, but that stubborn look was on her which told him her resolution had set like cement. "Do you think I'd pass up the chance to see Burgess' face when you set a sign right in front of his surveying stake?"

"I'm hoping he won't see me. Be dark before long and I can set 'em and get."

The dinghy rocked sluggishly on the water below the guard. Laura stepped to the edge of the deck. "As it happens, Colonel, I own this boat. If you want to go with me, you may. Otherwise, one of the men will row me."

Furlong muttered and took her arm while she descended into the boat. . . .

In about fifteen minutes the sounds began . . . throbbing of a donkey engine and the clear ring of metal. Could end-of-track be this far ahead? the colonel wondered. Before them, suddenly, they discerned a

low red mole of fresh earth traversing the higher ground, angling to intersect the creek a few hundred yards above them. Then, in the smoky sunset light, they saw the stork-like legs of a low trestle stepping across the stream.

Furlong pulled ashore through a tangle of weeds. He stepped out, waded a short distance, and climbed the bank. From here he could see the railroad camp along the bank of Salt Creek. Timbers had been laid half way over the creek on the driven piles. Just below the uncompleted trestle was moored Tex Burgess' small side-wheeler.

Men moved about the camp, ganging up at cook-fires, talking, performing the last tasks of the day. Furlong walked into camp.

Colonel Furlong carried a wooden sign under his arm and a mallet in his right hand. The sign said:

NO TRESPASSING.
PROPERTY OF SHREVEPORT
AND TEXAS NAVIGATION CO.

A few men looked at him but no one recognized him until he had reached the ties where they stepped out onto the trestle.

Then a man said, "Ain't that Colonel Furlong?"

Furlong thrust the pointed end of the stake attached to the sign into red soil and began to pound.

Behind him, he heard a stir growing in the camp. Just as he finished, Joe Maroon came striding through the arousing camp. Maroon had a shovel over his shoulder but no other weapon. About the short, thick-set work boss there was an air of wicked delight. Maroon looked at the big cowman who stood there peering over the tops of his spectacles with the mallet gripped tightly in his hand.

"Colonel," Maroon said, "this is right neighborly of you. I've been meaning to get down to see you. Can't offer you free beer, but there's all the swamp water you can drink."

"Read the sign yet?" Furlong asked.

A crease came between Maroon's eyes. He bent to read it. "What's the joke?"

"No joke, Maroon. Mrs. Nash leases this land from the state. You'll have to swing north about thirty miles. Think there was some kind of an agreement-like, between Burgess and Mrs. Nash about respecting each other's property rights."

With Maroon standing there sandbagged, he said pleasantly, "Pass it on to Burgess, will you? Naturally there'll be some unpleasantness if them piles aren't pulled up."

He started on down the bank. In the camp, an uproar was growing.

* * *

When he reached the boat, Laura was standing up with a little pistol in her hand. In the dying sun's ruddiness, her hair was gold-and-copper. He clambered in and roughly pushed her to her seat, yanked an oar from the lock to shove the boat out through the reeds.

"They'll be after us!" he said.

The boat whistle moaned hoarsely. Footfalls thumped along the creek path and men shouted. The colonel put his strong back to the task of hauling the big dinghy through the water.

In twenty minutes he was almost completely winded, yet he began to feel relieved. He lost this false security when the threshing of the steamboat's paddles reached them.

Laura stood up. "Colonel! They're going to back over us!"

He rowed strongly into the stew of decaying vegetable matter, of vines and rushes, and there the boat was caught in the swamp's grip and the colonel rested on the oars and looked up. The steamboat loomed above them like a cliff.

"Boat ahead!"

The pilothouse, darkened except for a single lamp behind the pilot, was occupied by a man in uniform, by the pilot, and by two other men who were Burgess and Tom Wingate. There was an altercation of some kind. Wingate appeared to lunge at the wheel, but the others thrust him back and the boat came on, the larboard edge of her wheel rolling onto the dinghy.

Furlong pulled the frightened girl onto her feet. "Jump!"

THE water filled his mouth and nose with stinking warmth. The rushes dragged at him. It was too deep to wade. Somewhere Laura was screaming for help. There was a brief chopping and the row-

boat was gone. The dark side of the steamboat slipped past.

Then something dark hurtled from the sky and landed with a great splash near the colonel. A moment later he heard gasping sounds, and then Tom Wingate's shout: "Laura! Laura!"

Her cries answered him. Wingate wallowed to where she was struggling in the water. By the time Furlong reached the spot, they were crawling out on the bank.

They behaved not at all the way the colonel imagined avowed enemies should. Wingate was trying to explain that he hadn't been responsible; he was promising to kill Burgess and at the same time he was stammering that he hadn't wanted to fight her all along, because he loved her.

Furlong remained quite sane. He was aware that the steamboat was preparing to return. He paused beside them to pour the water out of his boots. "Excuse me, folks," he said. "They're a-comin' back, and I don't think we're outfitted for much of a scrap. Shall we take a walk? Or are you staying, Wingate?"

"Staying!" Wingate snapped. "I'm coming back here to ride Burgess out on a rail. We've got yellow fever in camp. I'm certain of it, because now I'm sure he's been bringing men in from plague towns. Most of the men have either quit to join you, or gone back to Jefferson. Last night he tripled the pay of all those who'd stay. He means to go ahead."

They started walking. "Where does that leave you?" Furlong asked.

Wingate scowled. "I swallowed everything he ever told me, because I wanted to build that road. I've got railroad iron in my bones, Colonel. And I didn't guess until lately that Burgess doesn't give a damn whether trains ever run on this road or not. I could build a better road with laths for ties and corset stays for rails. But he's collecting a fat subsidy from the state for every mile he lays in Texas. After he reaches Baton Rouge, the state will pay off."

The steamboat was lumbering back up the stream, searching the bank. They hurried away from the torchlight.

Sometime before midnight they were floundering along the creek when they encountered the *Georgiana,* again crawling up the shallow stream. There were hot water and a welcome bed for Laura, and for the men there was coffee laced with rum. Furlong was dead-tired. Still it was necessary to talk with Wingate and achieve something like a plan.

All he could think was that he had probably failed.

"What if we do whip him?" he growled. "I came to make my stake. If we wreck him, that don't help me and it ruins a lot of stockholders."

Wingate pondered. Suddenly he said, "How'd you like to help me build that railroad, Colonel?"

"Me? All I savvy how to build is a trail herd."

"No, sir. You savvy how to get things done. And you know men. If I was to back up your claim to the board of directors, reckon they could be persuaded to trade you an equal amount of D & B R stock for your old certificate and appoint you to Burgess' job. Especially if they know Laura can hold them up here until the Mississippi blows dust in January.

"Damn it," he said, "I'd still like to build that road! Go back and patch up the blind sags and finish up with something a four-six-oh could drag a freight over. You and I could do it, Colonel."

Furlong poured another inch of rum into his cup. Wingate's idea was great . . . except that it had one large hole in it. "What's Burgess going to do when we tell him he's fired?"

"He'll fight!" Wingate said.

CHAPTER SIX

Swampland Massacre

THE first thing they discarded was the idea of a surprise attack. Burgess was expecting a battle: They could be sure of that. The next thing they abandoned was the idea of raiding the railroad camp by any route but the creek. It was an exhausting trip through the swamp and a dangerous one.

That left it up to Captain Rice. The old riverman frowned. "It ain't no way to treat a Hippel and Evans. She's built for the branches, but not trickles down a gutter. That scow of Burgess' makes it because she'll float in a heavy fog."

"You mean you can't do it?"

"Did I say that? I mean we may have to carry her over the shoal spots on our backs, but we'll keep pushin' as long as there's water enough to wet the bottom of the boat. When do you want to leave?"

"When can you work up steam?"

"Half hour. Been keeping a hand-warmer under the boilers all night."

"Tell you what we'll have to do," Wingate said. "Cut back to the bayou and wait for a packet to take Laura back to Jefferson. We can't take her along."

Furlong smiled. "Glad she's your worry, son. You go tell her, if it will make you feel any better. Then we'll start up-stream."

The surprising part was, Laura agreed. They worked back to Big Cypress Bayou and spent the rest of the morning waiting for a boat to pass. Eventually a packet *chow-chowed* into sight and they swung in alongside her, running the landing stake across. Furlong watched Wingate help her across, the girl clutching his arm as if she had suddenly become helpless.

In the blunt heat of mid-day, the *Georgiana* thrust once more into the creek. Furlong set out kegs of beer, waited until the men had worked up a mlid glow, and made them a little speech.

"Boys, I've been doin' a lot of talking about building railroads in the swamps. Come right down to it, there's no reason it has to be so bad. With good pay, beer rations, and plenty of grub, a man ought to be able to tough it out.

"Wingate and I have an idea that that railroad can be built a lot better than Burgess is building it. We're going up and talk to Tex about it, but I don't think he's going to listen. In case he doesn't, we'd be proud to have you boys back us up—with a guarantee of good jobs after we run him out. Anybody interested?"

He had timed it about right. The beer had helped uncover a lot of grievances against their ex-boss. Somebody said, "We're goin' to need some axe-helves to do a fit job, Colonel."

All through the long afternoon the stern-wheeler kept lunging, backing and scraping up the choked shallow stream. The pilot kept a leadsman on the bow, throwing his lead continually and calling up the marks.

As the boat threshed through the last bend and churned toward the stern of Burgess' steamboat, moored close to the trestle, a long plume of steam lifted from the whistle of the railroad boat. The hoarse prolonged shout of it came a few seconds later. From the trestle, spikers ran back to the red mole of earth supporting the ties. There was a stir of activity on the boat, a few men jumping ashore.

Burgess stepped from the pilothouse with a rifle in his hands. Maroon came from a gang of tie-buckers toward the trestle; he halted on the stream bank as Burgess' shout echoed through the abrupt quiet. Only the slow paddling of the *Georgiana's* wheel sounded.

"Take it back, boys!" Burgess shouted.

The colonel stood with his men on the main deck. He heard Tom Wingate answer from the boiler deck, above him. "Want a talk with you, Tex."

"I'll talk to you in Jefferson. Get out of here."

The path of roiled water between the *Georgiana* and the other boat's stern was slowly passing under the stern-wheeler's snub prow. Wingate replied, "You've built all the railroad you're going to. We're taking over."

Burgess snapped the rifle to his shoulder. Furlong heard Wingate hit the deck. He heard the crash of the gun and saw the railroad man turn and step into the wheelhouse. At this moment the colonel loosed a shout in the direction of the engine room. Four men came out carrying burning pitch-pine torches. Furlong's gang parted to let them run up to the guard as the *Georgiana* slowed behind the other boat and roughly prodded the flimsy fantail. The colonel was the first man to board her.

What the Texan remembered chiefly about it was the confusion and the racket.

Ashore, Joe Maroon's track workers were rapidly separating into those who desired to fight and those who preferred to run.

Colonel Furlong barged into the hot, deserted engine room. He spotted the resin barrel and started moving it toward the door. Other men joined him and they tipped it over on deck and started forward with it, leaving a trail of amber chunks which one of the men with a torch set fire to. Other men worked around to the larboard side and cut the boat loose from her

dock moorings. The *Georgiana* commenced booting the smaller boat in the direction of the trestle.

The burning resin began to flow over the planks. Flame blistered the painted cabinetry of the boat. It was going to go up like a powder barrel. Furlong saw right then that the sooner he could get the men off it, the better. Leading them through the cluttered main deck, he pointed to the bank and told them to jump. Some of them made it; others slid back into the water and had to clamber out. But Joe Maroon was there to meet all of them. His crowd carried shovels and axe-helves.

A dozen of Burgess' boatmen jumped from the upper decks to the shore as they smelled the smoke. Tom Wingate landed not far from them. Turning, he shouted at the colonel, "Get off that thing, Furlong! She's going up!"

Furlong waved him on. "I've got to say hello to an old friend."

Furlong started up the steps. He had a fleeting recollection of a suave stranger who had, for a few weeks, been the hero of Wichita Falls.

No one could have convinced Colonel Furlong, at that time, that one day he would be stalking this man with the intention of killing or capturing him, and not particularly caring which. But the colonel's old .45 was cocked and he was trying to decide whether to shoot first or talk first.

The door to the wheelhouse was half open. Now, suddenly, it was yanked wide and Tex Burgess came down three steps, his gun swinging at his side, before he saw the colonel. He halted, a paunchy, unshaven, sweating man with a look of fright in his eyes.

He did snap the gun up, and this was what fooled the big man below him. He fired with one hand, from a point below the hip. In the dimness, the flames was a pale strip of light. A vast roar shook the companionway. The bullet tugged at Furlong's sleeve.

Furlong said, "I've got you, Burgess."

He fired through the smoke cloud rolling down upon him.

Burgess came down another step and slipped to his knees, groped blindly before him and noisily rolled over and over down the companionway.

Smoke that was not gunsmoke began to fill the passage. Furlong groped downward and hesitated above the fallen man. Hell, he thought; he's a human being. Just got under the wire, maybe, but if he were still alive he shouldn't be left here to fry. He shouldered him and carried him out on deck, where the smoke rolled heavy and yellow through the seams of the boat. The *Georgiana* had pushed her right up under the trestle, which was also catching fire. Furlong heaved Burgess' body, like a sack of wheat, toward the bank. It fell far short and flopped back into the water.

The colonel jumped.

The landing took the wind out of him, and when he looked about for the railroad boss there was no sign of him. Furlong strode up the bank and looked about.

It had been a pretty good battle, but it was about over. Joe Maroon sat stupidly on the ground with a burly railroader standing over him. There were more men lying about than ties, and from the string of men dragging up the tracks, the colonel wondered if somebody had set out a barrel of whiskey and a ladle up yonder.

Wingate, his face bloody but with a big grin, came toward him. "Take over, Colonel."

* * *

Colonel Cabe Furlong was with the Dallas and Baton Rouge Rail Road eight months. The day they reached the Mississippi, he sold his stock and bought a ticket on a Red River steamboat. He was so hungry for the sight and smell of cattle that he thought he'd just bed down in a corral when he reached home. And it was going to be a mighty big corral, he reckoned, with a stack of gold in the bank like his to finance it.

Tom and Laura Wingate saw him off at the landing. Just before the boat left, Wingate shook his hand. "So long, Colonel. We'll be seeing you the day we lay rails into Wichita Falls."

The colonel said that would be fine. "Just be sure you bring your railroad with you if you're going to sell any stock, though," he said.

Wingate seemed to get the point pretty damned fast.

THE END

★ LONG ON GUTS,

By

THOMAS THOMPSON

Dramatic Novelette
of California's Water War

SHORT ON GUNS ★

CHAPTER ONE

The King of Rocky Butte

Bert Tuttle's creed was that the spoken word of an honest man is more powerful than the guns of tyrants. But when the Rocky Butte robber-killer combine threw down its grim challenge—the broken, bullet-riddled body of his father—Tuttle learned that a politician's loud-mouth talk, without fighting guts and a blazing six to back it up, isn't worth a gentle, psalm-shoutin' ninny's two-bit damn!

THE blue fly that droned incessantly and drummed its thick round body against the window pane had come in with the constable when he had opened up this morning. It had refused to find its way out as the day wore on and the heat seeped in through the cracks of the warped and weathered building. Twice now hard-faced men had gotten up from their benches

One side of Jefferson Irsfeld's face was blown away

and tip-toed over to open the protesting windows, trying vainly to catch any current of air that might be stirring outside; trying vainly to relieve the human stench that was moistly thick in the overcrowded courtroom. Bret Tuttle, candidate for United States Senator from California, wondered how much longer he could stand it.

The judge had taken off his coat an hour ago and dark sweat stains outlined the cross of his suspenders on his back. The harangue of the attorneys that had started out on a fiery note early this morning had dwindled now to a deadening monotone. Brett Tuttle swallowed against the dryness in his throat. It seemed that Jefferson Irsfeld and Sudden McDonald were the only men in the courtroom still alive.

That was as it should be, in a way, for here in this pocket of hell pinched between the vast expanses of San Joaquin wheat and the frowning impenetrable boldness of the Sierra Nevada mountains, Rocky Butte Valley was a land whose destiny depended on water. With water it blossomed with the diversified crops of its twenty farmers; without water it died, and the men became as lean and hard as the baked adobe ground that cracked beneath their feet. At such times nothing lived. Nothing, except Jefferson Irsfeld, whose whims decided whether or not there would be water in the valley. Jefferson Irsfeld and one other. Sudden McDonald, the cattleman. A man whose very strength seemed to come from the suffering of others. Yes, it was fitting that these two should be the only spots of life in the crowded courtroom.

Tuttle looked at Irsfeld, sitting there now, his well-kept hands tapping the top of his gold-headed walking stick. This was the man Bret Tuttle had set out to destroy legally. A middle-aged giant with a splash of iron gray mutton chop whiskers; a face that was neither broad nor narrow; eyes that were bright with cunning. There was a constant twitching around his lips that formed neither a smile nor a sneer. The water baron of Rocky Butte Valley. Only the will of the people and the strength of laws could stop the race of Jefferson Irsfeld that was springing up in this speculative land of California. No one knew this better than did Bret Tuttle.

Sometimes a hard-headed farmer would rebel against the tyranny of Irsfeld. Sometimes, too, a man would find suddenly he could no longer afford to pay the new water rates that had been levied against his land. There were times when a cabin would be found deserted. There was once when a dead man was found, still grasping the handles of his earth-locked plow. There was once—just two weeks back—when a tall, lean man with sparse white hair was found slouched across one of Jefferson Irsfeld's headgates, his face in the water, a .44-40 bullet through his chest.

Since that day Bret Tuttle had prayed fervently for tears to wash the dryness from his eyes or for reasoning to wipe the bitterness from his heart. Tuttle had made almost a god of his dad—that tall, lean man with the sparse white hair. But even above that love came his feeling of responsibility for this California land that he called home.

It was Bret Tuttle, himself, who had held back the dynamiting of the headgates. It was Tuttle who had kept the lynch rope from Irsfeld's fat neck. This, in a small way, was the fight he could carry to the halls of the United States Senate, if he were elected. This incident here in Rocky Butte could represent the entire arid western half of the United States. As a son, Bret Tuttle wanted to kill the man who sat there just three feet in front of him, calm and cool, his hands laced over the top of his gold head walking stick, his black eyes fever bright and calculating. But as a crusader Bret Tuttle wanted a decision handed down in this court today.

HE WANTED a decision that would say whether or not one man had a right to own a river whose heart pulsed in the government lands of a national forest; whose life blood came from the melting wash of God-given snow. This decision must be made here in Rocky Butte. And then it would carry on to apply to the mighty turbulence of the Missouri, the irrepressible grandeur of the Columbia, and the earth-tearing mud-tossed mane of the Colorado. This was a thing that was bigger than the love of a son for his father.

And yet, Bret Tuttle knew that no less than fifty pairs of eyes were boring into his back at this moment. Eyes that were hot with accusation and mistrust. Eyes belonging to men who held back now only out of respect for the man who had so recently

died and an unexplainable awe of that man's son. They would not hold back always, Tuttle knew.

Bret took his handkerchief and wiped his streaming face. Through the open window he caught the tang of dead-dry salt grass and pungent alkali. He saw a buggy coming down the dusty street and a dull, dead longing went through him as he saw the girl draw up alongside the hitching rack in front of the store. He could not take his gaze away as she climbed down out of the buggy, smoothed the creases from her full skirts, popped open a tiny parasol and then went up the board sidewalk to the store.

This feeling that was in him was not new. He knew that he loved Laura Quintana. Loved her desperately; and yet now, in his hour of greatest need, he knew he could not go to her and tell her the things that were in his heart. For in spite of the feminine beauty of her she was a girl who understood better the workings of a rifle than she did the ponderous mouthings of a courtroom. She had been born and raised here in Rocky Butte and Washington, D.C. was a place in a book; Congress a frock-coated body in the pages of *Judge*.

To her, life was a hard thing to be grubbed out of the soil; soil that was utterly worthless when dry; soil that would produce anything when it was dark and scented with life-giving water. And water was a thing for which you fought. It had always been this way.

Above the drone of the lawyers Brett heard the scuffing sound of someone trying to avoid notice; there was the squeak of dry boots. He turned his head and saw Sudden McDonald, the cattleman, tiptoeing out of the courtroom.

It was like McDonald to walk out this way. He came only as a morbid spectator. Life or death in the valley meant nothing to him. Through the window Bret watched the tall lean man, no older than himself, amble over toward the general store. And Bret Tuttle found himself fighting unsuccessfully against the feeling that was racing through him. He wondered sometimes whether it was an understanding of the inherent danger of the man or was it jealousy?

The feeling was still in him when the testimony ended, a half hour later. Men did not leave the courtroom. Their eyes swung fixedly to Judge Scofield who stared moodily at his desk and kept popping the knuckles of first one hand and then the other. They had brought Judge Scofield in from Dinuba to get an unbiased opinion, and every man in that room knew he would get exactly that.

The decision was lengthy. It seemed almost painful to the mild-eyed judge who handed it down. He quoted laws and he quoted precedents, but the gist of it all was that once again Jefferson Irsfeld had won. A man had a right to protect what was legally his; it was as fundamental as the Constitution of the United States, and there was no justice court in the land that could legally break it.

Bret Tuttle Sr. had been stealing water. Water to save his land, it was true. But water that had been cut off from his use because he had failed to meet the new season rate of $25.00 an acre imposed by Jefferson Irsfeld. Water to which, perhaps, he had a moral right, but legally he had none. Jefferson Irsfeld had a right to protect what was legally his, and Dave Musgrove, the ditch-tender who had pumped a .44-40 slug into the heart of Bret Tuttle Sr., had merely been doing his duty.

There was no sound of panic from the courtroom. It was Bret Tuttle's move now. He, with the persuasive power of his voice, had convinced them they should hold this trial. They had listened to him and now the trial was over. It was Bret Tuttle's move.

Jefferson Irsfeld had a bit of the showman in him. He seemed to sense that the fuse was short on the powder key and he seemed to welcome the impending explosion. He stood up, a tall man, paunchy now with soft living, but a big man with an imposing strength about him. He looked at the crowd of hard-faced farmers as if they were serfs under his baronage. The twitching around his mouth could be called neither a smile nor a sneer. He held his walking stick in his left hand and he tapped the gold head with the open palm of his right. His voice was soft when he spoke.

"Gentlemen," he said flatly, "you have heard the decision. I have shown my fairness by permitting this ridiculous trial. It is my duty now to tell you that after checking my accounts it seems that a general raise in rates is necessary. I trust that the

more intelligent of you will not be persuaded by the rabble-rousers of this community!" He put on his tall beaver hat and walked out of the courtroom. The blast of hatred that followed him was a thing that could be felt, but no man made a move toward him. Their gaze was riveted on Bret Tuttle, waiting for the signal to go ahead. It was a signal that did not come, and in time they filed out, slow-thinking men, men of decision, but men who needed guidance above all. They had come to look to Tuttle for that guidance and now he was failing them.

And alone there in the courtroom Bret Tuttle knew what that meant. They'd turn elsewhere for their leadership, for in time a man asks questions only of those he knows will furnish the answer he wants to hear. There were two here in Rocky Butte Valley who could furnish the right answers now. One was Sudden McDonald—a festering sore of a man with a gun on his hip and a dozen guns to back him. A man without a cause. A lust killer. The other was one whose fervor was as strong as Bret Tuttle's. An emotionally overwrought Joan of Arc with vengeance for her god. There was always a biting pain within Bret Tuttle when he thought of Laura Quintana in that way.

CHAPTER TWO

JUL 3 1947

Foothill Pledge

IT HAD always been a source of amusement to Bret Tuttle to note to what lengths a grown man would go to fool himself. He thought of that as he pretended it was accidental, his meeting Laura Quintana there in front of the store.

She was an impulsive, dramatic girl. To her conventions were things made for those who needed them. The blood of a Spanish Conquistadore, thinned now by many generations, still left the mellow flavor of its name and the pit of fire that burned in her velvety dark eyes. Her skin was skin that invited the sun, and the vibrant life of her was in the ample curve of her lips. Her voice was low, throaty, and she spoke always as if she were rushing against time. She put her hands on Bret's arms and stood tantalizingly close.

Her perfume was in his nostrils and there was a heady surge of power that made him want to take her in his arms, right here on the street. Made him want to hold her and crush her against him and not let her go until he had told her the things that were in his heart and made her see that the world was more than this patch of water-starved alkali clinging here in the cup of the foothills.

For a second he knew he had the strength to do it, then she looked up at him, her eyes hard, and she said, "The men are over at Ransom's saloon. I saw them go there. They'll be waiting for you. You're the one who has the right to lead them."

There it was again, that hot surge of unplanned emotion. The thing that made her so completely irresistible, and yet at the same time so dangerously impossible. At times his need of her was so strong that he had considered throwing off the dream of a lifetime; and then again, like today, when he would see Jefferson Irsfeld, openly sucking the life blood from the veins of a handful of men, Tuttle knew that nothing must stand in the way of his destiny.

In his brain was the power to reason; on his tongue was the power to sway men's decisions. It had thundered within him for as long as he could remember—a burning, tearing thing that at times seemed ready to burst the skin of him if it did not find another outlet. In the Senate he could make himself heard. He knew it. There he could be like thunder on the mountain top—make the Department of Interior see and act upon its responsibility to the water supply of the public domain.

He looked at the girl and he said, "Thank you, Laura."

Those hot pits of fire were in the dark depths of her eyes now, and her words rushed out—low in her throat, spilling out as if racing against time. "Then you'll do it, Bret! I knew you'd do it. I made them wait because I knew you'd do it. You're one of us, Bret. Bret, be careful. For God's sake, be careful. I couldn't stand to lose you, Bret."

She looked around quickly, then came close to him and put her arms around his neck. Her lips brushed his ear. "I've got the dynamite over at the house. I've got it hidden under the floor." Her lips lingered a second on his cheek, then drew away. The older women there in front of

the store sniffed disdainfully, picked up the hems of their skirts and hurried inside. She stood there, her eyes still glowing, her voice softer now. She said, "I knew you'd see it's the only way."

His lips scarcely moved when he answered her. "But it's not the only way, Laura. It's no solution at all. I'll have no part of it!"

He turned quickly and walked away, unwilling to face the fire in her eyes and the twisting bitterness that he knew could come from her lips. He turned into Duniway's bar, because it was the first place that offered positive refuge against her.

The perspiration was seeping from his forehead and he was physically sick. He stood at the end of the bar nearest the door and motioned for a drink. The glass was half way to his lips when his eyes became more accustomed to the dimness and he saw the men there at the other end of the room. Jefferson Irsfeld and Sudden McDonald—calm, relaxed, a half smile on their faces. And groveling there between them, his eyes wide with terror, his thin, beard-stubbled face twitching, was Dave Musgrove, the headgate keeper who had pumped the fatal bullet into the body of Bret Tuttle's dad.

Bret set his glass down on the bar and some of the whiskey sloshed over the rim. The accumulation of emotions in him became a primitive physical thing now over which he had no control. He stood back and took off his coat and then he walked slowly up to the three men there in the semi-darkness.

It was Dave Musgrove who gave a squeal of terror and pushed back against the wall. Sudden McDonald had a broad smile on his face and a tantalizing hardness in his eyes. He said, "If you've got fight in you why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

Bret Tuttle looked at the man who was so near his own age and build. He said, "I've got no fight with you. Not yet."

DAVE MUSGROVE had both hands out in front of him, pitifully trying to protect his face. He was slobbering over his words. He said, "Please, Bret. I didn't know it was your daddy.. Honest I didn't. I didn't shoot to kill him nohow. I was jest doin' my job, Bret. That's all I was doin'. Jest doin' my job. I got a wife and kids to feed, Bret. If I don't do my job I get fired and an old man like me can't get a job every place."

"It's all right, Dave," Bret Tuttle said softly. "It's not you I want."

It wasn't until then that Jefferson Irsfeld saw the meaning in Bret Tuttle's eyes. Until then Irsfeld had stood aside, his hands gripped tightly around the gold handle of his cane. He had made no attempt to protect Dave Musgrove and he had been unable to hide the sadistic gleam of pleasure in his beady black eyes. Now those eyes widened slightly and the constant twitching around his mouth was gone. He half turned, and the gold-headed walking stick flashed and chopped down against Bret Tuttle's shoulder.

It was a stunning, paralyzing blow, and Bret twisted his body as he sank his fist into Irsfeld's ample middle. But if he had expected Irsfeld to go down he was disappointed. For the very qualities that had put the man into as hard a business as he was in and the very things that had kept him alive all this time were things that could not fail to find their way into his will and into the very secretions that toned his muscles when the need for physical strength was imperative. He swung the stick again and it caught Bret alongside the head, knocking him to his knees.

There was a blood-haze across Bret's eyes as he got to his feet. He saw McDonald standing there, leaning against the bar, the smile still on his face. He was having another drink. Dave Musgrove had scooted out the back door to safer ground. Theo Duniway, the saloonkeeper, kept staring at the two men and wiping a spot on the bar that was no longer wet.

From there on the fight was a farce. A degrading barroom brawl. Newspapers that opposed his election—and there were plenty of them—would tell of how Bret Tuttle had walked into a saloon, made an unprovoked attack on Jefferson Irsfeld, and then seen too late the folly of the move he had made and had tried ungracefully to back out of the whole affair while still trying to avoid having his face beaten in.

They wouldn't fail to mention that Jefferson had done a pretty good job of taking care of himself. But they would fail to mention what happened next, for no one

but Jefferson, Bret Tuttle and Sudden McDonald saw it.

Jefferson Irsfeld, standing there, feet spread wide, face purple with rage, made a deft movement and twisted the handle from his walking stick. The shank of the stick fell to one side and grasped in Jefferson Irsfeld's hand was a wicked needle-like dagger surrounded by the cluster of barrels of a .22 caliber pepperbox pistol.

At this close range that small caliber gun would be deadly enough. It was Sudden McDonald who snatched the bottle off the bar and cracked it across Jefferson Irsfeld's wrist. The lethal weapon went spinning into a far corner of the room.

For a second Tuttle stood there, looking at the man who had saved his life. He was ashamed of himself now for having lost his head and he was ashamed of having accepted help from Sudden McDonald. He said, "Thanks, Sudden. It's more than I would have expected."

The smile never left McDonald's face. He followed Bret toward the front of the saloon and in a low voice said, "Maybe you've got me all wrong, Tuttle. Maybe you and me could get together. I been talkin' to Laura. She's got a lot of sense, that girl. She knows how to handle things."

Bret Tuttle stopped and turned to face the man at his elbow. He was a good four inches shorter than McDonald, but there was something about him that canceled the difference in height. Some said it was the massiveness of his shaggy-haired head, the breadth of his shoulders. Some said it was the makeup of his face, the wide moody eyes of a poet set in a block of granite. At such times there was an almost fear-inspiring power about this gun-shunning crusader. There was pure venom in his voice when he said, "You know how I feel about you, McDonald?"

"Suppose you tell me," McDonald said. He spoke through his teeth and his hand had dropped to the gun at his side.

Tuttle's eyes never left the ashen face of the tall man who stood there, an unmasked urge to kill pounding the prominent veins at his temples. He said, "You're rotten, McDonald. You're like a festering boil that's coming to a head. You'd turn on the farmers as quick as you would on Irsfeld. You don't know what you want except that you hate anything that smacks of decency and success and you have a perverted idea that maybe you would be the kingpin if you wiped out everyone in the valley. That's how I feel about you, McDonald. Is it clear enough?"

Great streams of perspiration were coursing down the hollow cheeks of Sudden McDonald. The sound in his throat was almost like a sob. His hand kept clenching and unclenching just over the butt of his gun. Those fanatical eyes of Tuttle held him and in time he broke. He said, "You rotten hound, some day I'll kill you for that," and he turned and went back to where Irsfeld was waiting, still rubbing his wrist.

Bret Tuttle picked up his coat as he went outside. He saw the rigs and the horses tied there in front of Ransom's saloon and he knew the men of Rocky Butte Valley were still waiting for his leadership.

CHAPTER THREE

"You Dirty, Yellow Coward!"

BUT they wouldn't get it the way they wanted it; not today nor any other day. He had promised himself that. Their way was not the answer. Bret and his dad had talked it over too long now, and Bret was sure, even when his father wasn't. The spirit of speculation on which California civilization was born had found its way into irrigation projects, the one thing that could make the state great.

One dead man or a dozen dead men wouldn't stop it. It was the basic wrong that let a man buy a piece of land without buying the water rights that went with it that was at fault. This was the thing Bret Tuttle had tried to make the people of Rocky Butte Valley see. The blasting of Jefferson Irsfeld's headgates was no solution. It was only the furtherance of a decade-long war.

The white heat of rage that had made him lash out at Irsfeld had run out of him now, and he was again level-headed and reasoning with only the fierce jealousy and mistrust he felt against Sudden McDonald to disturb him. There at Ransom's saloon the men of the valley were waiting for some word from this shaggy-haired youngster who had raised himself from the hot dust of the valley to a place of importance among men. They were waiting for some

word and they deserved such word. The unquenchable fire of the crusader was in Bret Tuttle as he turned toward Ransom's.

There was fanatical hope in the eyes of those twenty hard-faced men who waited there in the saloon when they saw Tuttle come through the door. They were like men who had waited too long in front line trenches for the order that would send them charging into the waiting ranks of the enemy. Like such men they looked up now and saw the confident form of their general come with their fighting orders. Their combined greeting was a low assortment of rumbles as they muttered his name.

There was no mention of his father's death nor was there mention of the decision handed down by Judge Scofield. There was no need to talk of such things as these. They were merely final straws, insignificant in themselves. The men moved aside and let Bret through and he walked up to the bar and stood there with his heels hooked over the rail, his elbows planted behind him on the mahogany. There was no sound in the room when he said, "I want to talk to you men." They nodded understandingly.

They were men in whom emotions stirred strong, and at first the magic of his words held them. They nodded acceptance to the cadence of his fervor and paid little heed to the meaning of what he said. He spoke of the solemn grandeur of Mount Union, standing there in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming, and he spoke of the three rivers, which, with their tributaries, controlled the industrial future of a region greater than any European country save Russia, capable of supporting a population greater than that which dwelt east of the Mississippi River.

He spoke eloquently of the Missouri, which watered the mountain valleys on the eastern slopes of the Rockies and the semi-arid regions of the Great Plains. He told of the beauty that was Oregon and Washington and Idaho and the fertile expanse that was Montana. Under the compelling power of his oratory the arid parts of these states became blossoming gardens, watered by the mighty strength of the most beautiful of all—the Columbia.

His eyes were the eyes of a poet as he looked beyond his audience grouped there in front of him and saw the sagebrush-studded land of the Southwest and even the heat shimmering expanse of California's own southern desert. This, he said, would be watered by the Colorado.

The men were beginning to look at one another now, shifting uneasily. One was bold enough to say, "We got our own problems, right here in Rocky Butte Valley."

Tuttle seized the interruption in his teeth and hurled it back at them like a thunderbolt. "If the land grows, we grow," he said. "If our country is great, then we're great. Even if Irsfeld didn't hold us up for rates we can't afford to pay, would his canal be big enough to get the best out of Rocky Butte Valley farm lands?"

There was a low muttering among the men as they admitted it would not be enough.

"You've heard Irsfeld say time and again that he was losing money on this project." He used the orator's trick of humor now and said in a low voice, "I'd like to lose money the same way!"

And while there was still a surge of laughter in the room he said, "But it's true no honest operating company has made money on water in California. It's speculative, that's all. They're issuing stocks and bonds. They're mortgaging the future of this state. Money-hungry men are dreaming of a new race of millionaires and making merchandise of the melting snows by selling rights and collecting toll from a class of society that has come to be known as water tenants. This is not the right of one man or of any private corporation. It'll take the government of these United States to handle a thing this big. Where's the one man who can build a dam across the Colorado River? Where's the one company who has the finances to harness the Columbia?"

THEY were agreeing with him now. He was saying things they could understand. He was saying that Jefferson Irsfeld had no right to control the water that ran into Rocky Butte Valley. This was the thing they wanted to hear. They were in full accord. Bret Tuttle felt it. Now was the time. His voice was soft and pleading when he said, "Men, you know I'm one of you. I was born and raised here in Tulare County. God knows I've done my share of

breaking hardpan and I've seen our crops shrivel for lack of water. I've lost my own father in this miserable fight. If there's a man among us who has a right to hate Jefferson Irsfeld, it's me!"

There was a hearty roar of approval, and as he raised his hand for silence the men obeyed immediately. Throughout the group he heard, "Let the boy talk. Bret Tuttle's got something to say. Let the boy talk."

Bret said, "I've met a lot of men in my campaigning for Senator. Influential men. Men who are more anxious to see California become great than they are to have a few tainted shekels in their pockets. They're with us men; believe me, they are. And when I get back to Washington, D. C. I'll have the backing of men that count and I'll be heard. I know I will! The time has come for water laws with teeth in them. It's past the time when a man should be able to stick a piece of paper on a tree at the edge of a river and say the water in this river is mine. We want foolproof laws for riparian rights. We want Government money to handle irrigation projects bigger than any man has ever dreamed of!"

They were listening to him. This strange, wide-eyed bushy-haired young man whose actual height was not over five foot ten, yet whose massive head and shoulders made him seem to tower above others. They were listening to the rich resonance of his voice and to the dream of future he painted. He dropped his hands to his sides and stood there in front of them. He said, "Gentlemen, I'm asking you to wait. I need Rocky Butte Valley and its water war to back me in a fight for the irrigation problems of the whole state. Dynamiting a headgate is not the solution, gentlemen. Please believe me."

For a second there was a thud of silence in the room, and then a lean hawk-faced man said, "He means right now after the trial and all. The law will be lookin' into this here thing, fellers. That close after the trial it might go harder with us. Maybe the boy's right."

Several others agreed and one stepped up and said, "When do you think would be best, Bret? Another three or four days my melon patch is gonna be done for."

Bret Tuttle had to grip the edge of the bar to get his words through his lips. He said, "I mean wait until I get elected. Let me take this thing to a higher court. I want to force it all the way up to the Supreme Court, and then when I'm in the Senate I can start an investigation and bring it all out into the open."

Old weather-leaned Chester Gifford stepped out, twisting his battered hat in his blue-veined gnarled hands. He had a slanting grin on his thin lips and a good-natured whine in his voice. He said, "You must be joshin', boy. I knowed your daddy fer fifty years."

Another man—younger—elbowed his way to the front. He said, "You mean to stand there and tell me I'm to let my crop go to hell just because of some high-falootin' idea you got?"

Their voices rose into a swirling crescendo now, and there was no beating them down. Men split up into groups, and one by one these groups drifted out of the saloon, leaving Tuttle standing alone against the bar.

He was standing there like that when the door flew open and Laura Quintana came in. The surging energy in her carried her clear across the room and she stood there in front of him, her delicately cut nostrils flaring, her bosom heaving, the fire pits bright in her eyes. Her naturally olive skin was a bloodless gray, and her full lips were drawn into a tight line.

Without warning she reached up and slapped him hard across the side of the face. "You dirty, yellow coward!" she said. "If you haven't got guts enough to lead them I know someone who has!"

She turned and ran back outside. Bret Tuttle stood there, his hand pressed to the place where her fingers had stung his cheek. He could feel the bite of that blow seeping deep inside him. It found a spot in his chest and it stayed there.

IT WAS not the sound the man made but rather the sharpness of the light that hit Bret's half-closed eyelids that made him look up when Sudden McDonald came into the saloon.

McDonald still had that fixed grin on his face. He had put on his spurs, and as he walked across the room the chains jingled and the huge Spanish rowels made a whirring sound as they struck the pine floor with every step.

He ignored Bret, nodded to the bartender and said, "Drink."

Bret said, "What's the play?"

"You've made your campaign talks around Rocky Butte Valley, Senator. You better make a try at it someplace else. Now."

"What's the matter, Sudden?" Bret Tuttle said softly. "Figure I might still have enough influence to convince somebody you'll double-cross them?"

McDonald had made a series of links with the wet bottom of his glass. He took his eyes off his own image in the backbar mirror now and looked instead at his hands. He said, "When I'm drivin' I don't tell the horses why. I jest tell 'em what to do."

"Suppose I don't take to your orders?"

"I handle things like that," McDonald said.

Tuttle's voice was soft. He took two steps forward and laid his hand on Sudden McDonald's shoulder. He gave a slight push, turning the man around to where he could face him. He said, "You told me a while ago that if I had fight in me I should pick on somebody my own size. You look about my size."

Sudden McDonald's eyes never wavered from Bret Tuttle's face. Not even when he tilted the drink in his hand and downed it did his eyes waver. He sat the glass back down on the bar and somehow his hand dropped and settled on the butt of the gun that was on his hip. There was no change in his eyes when he said, "That's not the way I handle things, Tuttle. Cuffin' folks around like you and Irsfeld did don't settle nothing. If you want to deal with me be ready to settle things more permanent like."

He turned abruptly and walked out of the saloon without paying for his drinks and the jingle of his spurs followed him out into the bright dust of the street. Bret Tuttle wiped the sweat from his palms and stood there looking after him. He thought of the dozen gun-hung riders that policed Sudden McDonald's Rafter S range and there was no doubt in him as to McDonald's meaning.

There was no doubt in him either as to what was happening to these people of his valley. They were destroying themselves and any chance they might have for a secure future. Even with every break in their favor they couldn't win.

Suppose they blew out the main headgate and filled the now dry canal that led into Rocky Butte Valley? Suppose they even went so far as to get rid of Jefferson Irsfeld and the law failed to convict them of murder? What then?

Stock had been sold and bonds had been let. There were other men and other capital in this thing. Silent participants, to be sure, but when they saw their investment threatened they would no longer be silent. There'd be injunctions and other legal tangles and during the monotonous days of litigation Rocky Butte Valley would dry up and the people would dry with it. Irrigation in California had become too big a thing to be fought down with fists or with a gun or with a few sticks of dynamite.

The heart of the evil had to be grubbed out now, and only equitable State and Federal laws could do that. Certain defeat awaited any other attempt at solution, and certain defeat was the fate that awaited the people of Rocky Butte Valley even if every break went in their favor.

But with Sudden McDonald leading them . . . Bret Tuttle shook his head sadly. Too sharp emotions sometimes made children of grown men. Of course Sudden McDonald would lead them against Jefferson Irsfeld. But after the fire and the heat of the thing was over. Then what? Sudden McDonald was no farmer and he had no regard for the dirt grubbers of Rocky Butte Valley. He was a cattleman and a cattleman who resented the constant encroachment of the farmer. With the single main canal at his disposal to flood the val-

"I'M GUT-SHOOTIN' YOU, CLARENCE!"

the lean cowboy said. "Keep whinin'! Keep beggin'! Why don't you git down on your knees? The law has to ketch me before it kin hang me—and nobody's goin' to strain a gut ketchin' the man that rid the country of Banker Clarence Burton Rinker!" You'll long remember Walt Coburn's explosive Montana cattle war novel in next month's smashing issue of *Dime Western*—on sale July 3!

ley at intervals he would have the finest piece of man-made pasture land in California.

Once he had disposed of Jefferson Irsfeld what was to prevent Sudden McDonald from turning his guns against these men he had temporarily befriended? Bloody war was shaping there in Rocky Butte. A bloody, senseless war that could arrive at no solution. It was time for outside interference if this carnage was to be prevented.

Bret Tuttle left the saloon and hurried up the street toward the telegraph office. The operator sat back in his chair, his feet on the desk, his eyeshade pulled low over his face. Outside the door were two men, men Bret had known ever since childhood. One of them placed an arm across the open doorway and said, "I don't think you want to go in there, Bret. Us folks here in the valley can handle our affairs without no outside help, if that's what you had in mind."

There was a flat stare in the other man's eyes. He said, "I hear tell you aim to do some electioneering up north, Bret."

Bret Tuttle turned and walked back down the street. He saw the four men in front of Jefferson Irsfeld's office. One of them was coiling a piece of new rope. He walked on, and in front of the general store he saw Laura Quintana, standing there in the shade of the porch, her lips drawn into a hard straight line. Her eyes were bright as if perhaps tears were not too far from the surface. Her hands were clenched, arms straight down at her sides. She looked through him and past him, and as he stood there a horse came cantering around the near corner and pulled to a dusty stop in the center of the street. The voice of Sudden McDonald said, "Either get out of town or quit walkin' around without a gun. Men are on one side or the other in Rocky Butte. We got no room for inbetweens."

It was folly to try to even make an answer, so Bret Tuttle turned his back on them and went to the livery stable and got his rig. As far back as he could remember he had hung out around the livery stable, listening to the wondrous stories of One-Eyed Mike. He went to pay the old man now and the livery man spat against the side of his rig and said, "I ain't hard up and I don't like the feel of your money."

Maybe that hurt as much as anything else. He didn't know. He lashed his mare savagely with the lines and headed for his father's place up near the head of the canal. He was nearly home when the idea struck him.

After that he lashed the mare into a full run and when he unharnessed her and turned her loose there in the corral at his own place, his hands were shaking. The fiery urge that drove him toward this thing he was about to do was just as strong as the fanatic blaze of righteousness that made him condemn himself in the eyes of his own people to support the thing he thought was right.

Foolhardy as it was, Bret Tuttle had decided to go to war. Not war against Jefferson Irsfeld and his blood-sucking water barony. It would take laws to defeat that. And not war against his own people, who, through hysterical emotion, saw only the mosquito that bit them and not the swamp that produced the pest. But war against the leech that lived on the disputes of others. The one who would destroy everything because he himself could not live with mankind.

Bret Tuttle found a six-shooter and a .30-30 rifle there in the house. He'd need them both against Sudden McDonald and his Rafter S crew.

CHAPTER FOUR

One Against A Legion

BRET TUTTLE threw an old army saddle on the buggy mare and raced darkness to the cleft in the hills where the trail came in from the Rafter S. Here in the jagged breaks of the rimrock he knew that for a while at least he could hold off an army.

He had no intentions of wiping out the gun-handy Rafter S by himself. Such a task would be a physical impossibility, he knew, but he felt if he could remove Sudden McDonald or show him up for what he was he could still stave off the impending bloodshed.

There'd be no turning back from Jefferson Irsfeld now, nor did he hope to; but he could talk Jefferson Irsfeld into making it a court battle. He'd done it before and he felt if he could silence McDonald and Laura Quintana he could handle the rest.

The courts were basically just and locally the sympathy was with the farmer. An injunction could work both ways.

The amassed citizenry of Rocky Butte Valley, irate enough to show they would tolerate no hesitancy but calm enough to show that they were men of intelligence and reason, could get an injunction to make Jefferson Irsfeld hold his rates to a level that would not mean bankruptcy until such a time as a more equitable agreement could be worked out.

That, Bret Tuttle knew, would give him the fighting time he needed. The time to lay his case in front of the big men of the state who had sworn to help him during his campaign for senator. That was the thing he had tried to make them see, and he had failed.

Failed because of an emotionally overwrought girl with the misguided fire of a Joan of Arc. Failed because of a social misfit of a man who rebelled at everything and took sides with no one. It would take years of love and understanding to change the girl, but he wanted to risk it. As for the man, there was only one way to change a man like Sudden McDonald. He had phrased it himself back there in the saloon when he had told Bret to be ready to deal on a permanent basis. Bret Tuttle checked the six-shooter he was carrying and pulled his horse to a stop. He needed only one look at the trail that led through the pass to know that he was too late. Not less than a dozen horses had passed through there, heading for town.

Something akin to panic struck him as he swung back into the saddle and dug his heels deep into the flanks of the buggy mare. The gun in his pocket was a strange thing of which he knew little. That methodical reasoning that was so much a part of his nature was gone now and he was a part of the entire twisted struggle for existence that was Rocky Butte Valley.

Those years of dust-filled, withered hell when only the knowledge that Jefferson Irsfeld was building a canal pulled them through. Then the three years of plenty when there was water for everyone and Jefferson Irsfeld's rates were within reach of those who broke the soil. Jefferson Irsfeld was part of the valley then. He coaxed more speed out of the mare. The hot breath of the arid land was dead against his face. But Tuttle's face was an ash gray.

He remembered Sudden McDonald, that festering sore of a man, growing more and more morose as the farmers acquired a meager wealth. Refusing to use the land himself and resenting those who did work it. Resenting success and life, whether it be the landholders or Jefferson Irsfeld. A dark, brooding man with the hint of death always at his hip. Lurking there like a festering boil, always threatening to come to a head, never taking an actual side with anyone.

And he thought of Laura Quintana and he knew that she was a lot like Sudden McDonald. Raised without a mother, born on an emotional high key, the struggle for existence was a thing that was out of proportion in her mind. And finally, when Irsfeld was no longer able to resist the gold that was his for the grasping, he started raising his rates and started squeezing in. It was then that Laura Quintana's emotions turned to a hatred that contaminated everything she touched.

He thundered in to the edge of town, eyes set deep in his blocky face, the wind ruffling through his shaggy hair, his mouth a straight hard line. He was physically tired from the thought that had gone through him, but larger and larger loomed the single purpose toward the man who had forced this thing. Sudden McDonald was the bad apple in the barrel, rotting those he touched. An inborn fairness that he could not control added the name of Laura Quintana to share the guilt. He tried his best to put that name out of his mind and found that he couldn't.

A premonition hit him even before he saw the dead man there in the street, and some morbid grasping thing dragged him from the saddle and forced him to stand there over the bullet-punctured body of Jefferson Irsfeld.

The blood that smeared across the wooden sidewalk and made a brown lumpy clay of the dust of the street was like a sickening line of print that told in inch high letters what had happened here.

One side of Jefferson Irsfeld's face was blown away. There was a hole the size of a man's fist between his shoulder blades. His left hand was a mangled bloody mass. But his right hand had lost that gold-handled dagger.

Bret Tuttle turned away from the gory twisted thing that up until a few minutes ago had represented power in Rocky Butte Valley. That tiny caliber gun was like the pitiful strength of reason against a mob bent on destruction.

This was not the work of the farmers of the valley, Bret Tuttle knew. He was one of them and he knew their brains and their thoughts. Their's were minds that could find justice in a lynch rope but would revolt at open slaughter such as this. It was plain that Sudden McDonald and his Rafter S crew had started their bloody play.

HE MADE a quick survey of the town and found that there were not over a dozen men in the entire place. Drawn shades, a sobbing here and there, strained feminine voices trying vainly to quiet the questions of children, told him that the women had locked themselves in against the horror of this day.

He found One-Eyed Mike at the livery stable and got only a sullen silence to the questions he poured at the old man. Duniway, at the saloon, stared fixedly and wiped the bar with a half-clean rag. Ransom, Benson. They wouldn't tell him that the farmers had gone to the main headgate. They didn't have to tell him. He knew that, for now they would follow blindly behind anyone who would lead them.

McDonald and his Rafter S crew, unleashed now, would concern themselves with murder. It was Laura Quintana who knew where the dynamite was hidden and it was Laura Quintana who would step out now, secure in that emotionally unbalanced mind of hers that it was her God-given duty to lead her people against the tyranny of Jefferson Irsfeld.

He ran back and got the jaded buggy mare and lashed her viciously up the canal road toward the main headgate there in the cottonwood thicket by the river. He saw now that he had forgotten the rifle, but he didn't turn back.

It was near his own place that he saw the bare-headed blood-smeared figure of old Dave Musgrove come staggering out of a willow thicket. The old headgate guard was pale and feeble from the loss of blood and his voice was a weak whisper. He said, only, "They been double-crossed. They'll be wiped out. All of them." He turned and started walking up the road, away from Bret.

Bret threw himself from the saddle and put his arm around the old man's shoulder, trying to hold him. "Easy, Dave," he said.

"They'll all be killed, I tell you," Dave Musgrove whispered. His eyes were hysterically bright.

Bret Tuttle slapped the old man across the face and shook him as hard as he dared. "Pull yourself together, you hear?"

"Bret, honest to God I didn't know it was your daddy."

Bret dug his fingers into the old man's shoulder until the ditch guard winced with pain. And suddenly his eyes cleared and his words tumbled out. He said, "Bret, you're a fair man. I know you are. I got all mixed up, Bret. I was workin' for Jeff Irsfeld and my friends are farmers. I was jest tryin' to do what I could." He started to cry.

"Never mind that," Bret said viciously. "What the hell is going on? Where's Laura?"

That seemed to register with Dave Musgrove. The old man raised his head and his voice was calm and natural. He spoke deliberately, but he hurried his words as if he knew for sure that this was the last speech he'd ever make.

He said, "Miss Laura. I did it fer her, Bret. I tried to talk her out of it, but when I saw she was set on blowin' the headgate herself I told her I'd see to it the gate wasn't guarded. I didn't like it, Sudden McDonald being there with her that way, but she said it was all right—that he was helpin' the farmers. Jeff Irsfeld rounded up all us guards and even his Mex ditchtenders and told us there was trouble comin'. But I already knew Sudden McDonald was gonna send six men on further down the ditch. I was to spot 'em, take my gun crew there and make out like that was all there was. We had it rigged up between Sudden and me that there'd be no shootin'. While we was busy doin' that Miss Laura and the rest would have clear ground to go ahead and blow the headgate. Sudden McDonald and his gun crew was gonna keep back in the cottonwoods and if anything went wrong they'd come a shootin'. Sudden said he and his boys would do all the shootin' there was to be

done. Yeah, Sudden said he'd come shootin'."

The old man stopped, gasping for breath, and Bret saw that the life was going out of him fast. He took his handkerchief and tried to plug the wound high in Dave Musgrove's chest but the old man waved him aside.

After a second he seemed to become conscious of the time that was running out. He said, "Sudden turned right around and told Jeff Irsfeld what he was up to. That was back there in town. That Sudden is a crazy man. After Irsfeld sent his men to the headgate with orders to shoot, Sudden shot Irsfeld. Jest kept shootin' him." The old man was breathing fast. "I tried to get away to warn Miss Laura and the folks to look out—that it was a trap. Sudden shot me. I got this far. They'll be slaughtered there by the headgate—"

Bret knew by the weight of the man that these were the last words he'd ever say. He took the .44-40 that had killed his father, left the dead man lying there at the side of the road, forced the mare into a crazy run and made straight for the headgate.

The brutality of Sudden McDonald was a thing that drove all the fear out of Bret Tuttle. He knew now that he had figured the man right from the first, that his only concern was to destroy and he would be as false to one side as he was to the other.

The well-traveled road stopped abruptly there against a bank of brush, the old wagon road to the headgate clearing having been long overgrown. Bret threw himself from the saddle, the .44-40 still gripped in his hand.

He broke out into the clearing and there not fifty feet away he saw the farmers of Rocky Butte Valley start toward the headgate. He saw Laura Quintana, out ahead of the rest, a small bundle in her arms. He knew that the fire pits were bright in her eyes now; he could see the determined tilt of her chin, the square set of her shoulders.

He screamed out a warning, and before his words had died on the flat hot air the guns of Jefferson Irsfeld's ditch guards set up a sickening chatter. He saw Laura Quintana stop, half turn to face him. She dropped the bundle she was carrying. She took three steps forward, arms outstretched, as if she were trying to reach him. Then her thin young body twitched twice more under the impact of lead and she fell forward on her face while the farmers of Rocky Butte Valley made a wild, broken scramble for cover.

Somewhere back there in the cover of cottonwoods the guns of Sudden McDonald and his Rafter S crew started their indiscriminate slaughter of farmer and water tenders alike.

CHAPTER FIVE

Last Battle

PRIMITIVE horror-inspired rage was the only emotion Tuttle felt now. He walked openly into the clearing where the body of the girl who had always been so vividly alive now lay so horrible still. The guns in the middle of cottonwoods made a muffled rumble like the roll of death drums, and lead whanged like the off-key screech of a demon violin.

Once he felt a burning streak of pain. It seemed to cut across both his shoulders and the impact of it knocked him to his knees but he got up and went on. He was kneeling there beside her when he heard his name and looked up to see a man dodge out of the shelter of cottonwoods. Even before he saw the distorted face the peaked hat told him it was Sudden McDonald.

He had no chance against the gun prowess of the killer, he knew, so Brett tried calmly to line the sights of the .44-40 rifle on that gray perspiration-silvered face that was dimly visible in the half shade. He saw the flash of fire, heard the roar of McDonald's gun. They seemed to come a long time after that smashing blow in his chest.

As he fell back he lost track of time, but he knew he was not dead. He raised himself slowly by pushing up against his elbows. When he was in a sitting position he saw Sudden McDonald walking straight away from him, back into the brush. A strength that seemed to come from completely outside him flowed into his arms and helped him raise the .44-40 rifle. The recoil was a solid tangible thing that felt good against his shoulder. He smiled as he saw Sudden McDonald stiffen and bow into a knot, then fall forward on his face. Even the knowledge that he had shot the man in the back was savagely good to Tuttle. He got to his feet.

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He was sobbing now and tears were running down his cheeks as he stooped to pick up the crumpled form of the girl. Her hair spilled loose from its ribbon binding and fell down over his arms. Her eyes were open, but there were no fire pits there, and her lips were parted as if she had tried to say his name. He cradled her in his arms and walked slowly back into the shelter of the woods.

He put her down as tenderly as he could, knowing now for sure that she was dead. Then he strode back out into the middle of the clearing, an awe-inspiring figure with his massive shaggy head and his broad sweep of shoulders. Twice he felt lead tag him, but he refused to go down, and he stood there calling out the names of the most influential of the farmers and then the names of the foremen of Jefferson Irsfeld's ditch crew. Some quality in his voice rose even above the cracking of the rifles. There was a lull of silence, and he knew that they heard him.

"Close in together, you farmers and you ditch men," he directed. "It's Sudden McDonald who double-crossed you. He's the only one can benefit from this kind of slaughter!"

A half dozen six-shooters confirmed his argument. He felt the false strength leave him and then he was crawling, pulling himself along, trying to get away from the constant spurting of dust that stung his cheeks and blinded his eyes. It was only a miracle that could save him now, he knew. But he didn't care, for the increased tempo of firing told him that both the ditch-tenders and the farmers had chosen to believe him at last and had turned their combined wrath on the Rafter S killers, trapped in a murderous crossfire between them.

There was little left of reality now. The long good fight he had made for justice—the struggle to rise to the Senate where he could do something for this land and these people who were a part of him. All that was a vague and distant dream that must have happened to someone else. The only thing that was real was his love for Laura Quintana. A bitter, hopeless love that made him curse himself for not having thrown aside his dream and taken her on her own terms. Now it was too late. She was gone.

Some vague twinge of consciousness told him that he was out of the clearing and back into the mat of underbrush. Lead still cut twigs and showered him with leaves, but he was safe now. Somehow he managed to drag himself to where he had left her and he took her dead face in both his hands before darkness came down. . . .

* * *

Time? There's little need to measure time when the heart is gone from a man. There's little need to measure time when one moment is as heavy with pain as the next. But somehow that day when the sun was less bright in the western sky he knew that a lot of time had passed.

Half the summer, he was to find later. It was the first time he remembered clearly the doctor coming to him. He didn't ask questions about himself, for he didn't care to know. He looked at the gray light settling out there beyond the window and turned his face back to the pillow. He was alive, and he would go on living, and there was small consolation in it. For with life came the knowledge that she was gone.

That bloody day when his accumulated failures had flared out in murderous warfare would always be there to haunt him. He could still see the bullet-shattered body of Jefferson Irsfeld. He would always see those last three steps *she* had taken toward him, her arms outstretched.

But as the days went on they came one by one to sit by his bed, those men of Rocky Butte Valley. At first they did little more than offer to roll him a cigarette. Much later they mentioned that the crops were good, and he knew then that they had managed to get water.

It was old One-Eyed Mike from the livery stable who spoke out, a little bolder than the rest. He was sitting there, late one afternoon, his chair tilted back against the ledge of the window. He dropped it suddenly to the floor and leaned forward and said, "Bret Tuttle, I've held you on my knee since the time you was born. You may be a great big United States Senator to some of these folks, but you're jest a young whupper-snapper to me. You used to have a lot of big ideas, Bret. You was gonna do a lot of fine things fer this valley.

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You ain't gonna do 'em layin' there in that bed a moonin' away all the time.

Bret Tuttle let a smile cross his square-cut face for the first time. He said, "Thanks a lot, Mike. A man changes his ideas sometimes, I guess."

"You're lettin' down a hell of a lot of people if you've changed yours!"

Something about the way he said it struck a spark of interest in Bret Tuttle. Old One-Eyed Mike saw it and hurried on. "Course I don't pretend to know about sech things," he said. "But they tell me that gettin' that there injunction to stop the stockholders from closin' up the canal was jest about exactly the way you'd a handled it. Only thing is, time's about to run out and they can't figger out what the heck to do. 'Pears like they got a grizzly by the tail and they're feared to let go." He eyed Bret out of his one good eye, swiveled his head around, looking for a place to spit, found none, swallowed hard, gulped twice and said, "Course, I don't know much about sech things but the way I get it is the dern stockholders, whoever they are, want to sell the whole shebang. What the folks are all leery of is that they'll sell it to somebody that's jest as bad as Jeff Irsfeld was. They been kinda honin' to ask you what they should do about it."

He got up then, made a sharp rasping sound in his throat and said, "But if you aim to go on layin' there starin' at the ceilin' 'pears to me they're jest wastin' their time countin' on you." He snatched his hat off the potted fern by the window and started for the door and when he was there he stopped and turned around, his one eye glittering viciously. "Another thing," he said. "You don't need to figger on me comin' here to visit you no more. I got an old sore-backed mule over there to the barn that's got more get up and gumption than you got." He slammed the door behind him when he left.

IT TOOK Bret Tuttle three more days before he could get out of bed and walk a little, but they weren't wasted days, because they gave him a chance to think of something other than the past.

It was on the third day that the doctor came in and asked him to sit down. Bret knew by the look in the doctor's eyes there

was something wrong. The gray-haired man played with the black ribbon on his glasses and said, "Bret, I hate to tell you this but I feel you ought to know. You're up and around a little now and you're going to have to know soon enough and I'd rather it was me that told you."

Bret waited, half expecting the doctor to tell him his own people no longer wanted him here in the valley. He ran his tongue across his lips and waited for the doctor to go on.

"You weren't elected, Bret. You were defeated in the primaries."

For a second it hit Bret Tuttle hard, then he said, "How did I make out here in Tulare County?"

The doctor smiled and said, "You got every damn vote there was son, and some there wasn't!"

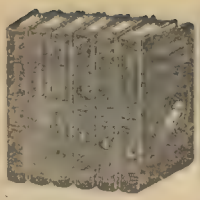
Bret Tuttle thought about that for a minute and he felt the strength returning to him. He said, "That's fine, doc. All we gotta do next time is spread out a bit, eh? Get all the men together, will you? I want to make a little talk."

"Bret, you can't do anything like that yet."

"The hell I can't. That injunction runs out in a few days. I got some ideas the folks ought to know about."

The doctor didn't hesitate long. He knew good medicine when he saw it. And late that afternoon when Bret Tuttle was propped in a chair against the bar in Ransom's saloon every farmer in Rocky Butte Valley was ringed quietly there before him.

He didn't make any flowery speech and he offered no preliminaries. He merely



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said, "As I get it, the stockholders want to sell the canal, the headgates and their present water rights."

He heard the rumble of affirmation.

"They don't care who they sell it to, just so they sell it. That right?"

That was right, they agreed.

"Then we'll buy it. All of us. We'll run it as a cooperative scheme until the time I can get elected to the United States Senate and get some of this stuff straightened out.

It was too much for them to grasp at first, and once again Bret Tuttle was the orator with the fervor of the crusader and fire in his words. He told them of the success of the Mormon projects and of Greeley, Colorado. Of Anaheim and Riverside right here in Califronia. "We'll run it ourselves, for ourselves," he said.

They were satisfied and they'd do it. He knew they would. He could see it in the angle of their heads, the set of their shoulders, as they toasted him in straight whiskey and then went on back their individual ways to their fields.

And Bret Tuttle, leaning on the arm of One-Eyed Mike, stood there in the door of the saloon and watched them go. Out beyond the edge of town he could see the level expanse of Rocky Butte Valley, cross-hatched by the black marks of irrigation ditches. It was vividly green now.

Beyond the valley rolled the brown foothills and the towering peaks of the Sierras. But Bret Tuttle was seeing farther than that. In a few years now he'd be candidate for United States Senator again and he'd be elected this time, he knew. And back there in Washington, D.C. he'd force them to see the plight of the little people like these here in Rocky Butte Valley.

Those half-forgotten plans tingled like wine in his veins and he knew that he'd never stop fighting. He'd have to fight in his own way, but he thought now that perhaps she would understand.

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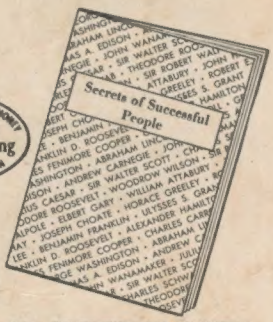

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